By faith transformed : Kierkegaard's vision of the Incarnation.

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BY FAITH TRANSFORMED

Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation

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ABSTRACT

'By Faith Transformed' is a study of Søren Kierkegaard's elucidation of the condition by which the Truth may be learned. Like Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, we are concerned in particular with that Truth which concerns us ultimately and which is confessed by Christians to be disclosed in Jesus Christ. Called 'faith' by Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments,* this condition is characterised by a transformation of the individual under the impact of revelation and is received as a gift from God rather than attained through human resourcefulness. The epistemological ramifications of this transformation are explored both in terms of the New Testament concept of *metanoia,* and in comparison with claims to cognitive progress in other fields. We also argue that progress in theology cannot be separated from the venture of faith made in response to Jesus' invitation to follow him. 'Knowing' Christ is an ethical and not just an epistemological matter. We conclude that the account of Christian conversion given by Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and approved by Kierkegaard in his own writings, is a faithful elucidation of the New Testament concept of *metanoia* and remains a pertinent challenge to the persistent attempts of moderns and post-moderns alike who propose to learn the Truth on quite different terms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In submitting this thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy I wish to express my gratitude for the contribution made to my theological education by the Reverend Dr Alan Torrance. Consistent with the way in which Kierkegaard too understands the matter, Alan has taught me that theological knowing begins 'before God' and is possible only on the basis that God in Christ has given himself to be known.

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who, as a student, enters the fray of Kierkegaard scholarship does so with a certain, quite proper, trepidation. There is, first of all, the immense volume of secondary literature which the fresh inquirer must somehow sift through and which, while enabling the student to share in the excitement of apprehending the genius of Kierkegaard, may also, and not infrequently, send him or her along paths which turn out to be dead ends.

Secondly, there is the immense complexity of the Kierkegaard corpus itself. Every idea one grasps, every conclusion one is tempted to draw must be cross checked against the many other related strands of thought which Kierkegaard will have advanced, not only in the formal publications but also in the Journals and Papers. But even in establishing a compendium of ideas on a particular subject, there remains the task of assessing the status of the different strands. Is a particular idea to be regarded as a note which Kierkegaard himself has discarded as unfruitful? Or does the idea in question chart the territory one must pass through on the way to some more fertile ground? Or again, are we perhaps now confronted with the highest resolution of a problem which Kierkegaard himself can offer? And most importantly, what is the relationship between the views expressed by the various pseudonymous authors and those commended by Kierkegaard himself? In this regard Bradley Dewey's counsel that 'those engaged in research should possess a reasonable familiarity with the complete works, then focus on a limited area of Kierkegaard's thought' ought to be heeded as also his suggestion that the right to interpret and criticise 'must be earned by the labour of diligent research, and the restraint of laudatory or pejorative inclinations when selecting, analyzing and interpreting the material from primary sources.'[1] The 'limited area' upon which we shall focus in this work is the epistemological recommendations of Johannes Climacus who identifies and elucidates, with Kierkegaard's approval we shall argue, the appropriate mode of human inquiry into the Truth which is disclosed in Jesus Christ.

The third and most important cause for trepidation is the task of reading Kierkegaard aright. Kierkegaard himself would think it a perpetuation of Christendom's delusions to approach his work armed only with scholarly concerns. The ridicule he reserved for the detachment and objectivity of *privat Dozenten* in his own time applies no less to ours. We must rather remember that Kierkegaard sought 'with joy and gratitude' the reader who

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[1] Bradley Dewey, *The New Obedience: Kierkegaard on Imitating Christ* (Washington: Corpus Publications 1968) p. xx.

reads 'for his own sake',[2] who attends to what is read with an infinite and passionate interest both in what is promised to him and in what is required of him as a human being before God. Kierkegaard scholarship, if it is to be Kierkegaardian not only in content but also in character, must therefore be directed towards the task of existing before God. Only where this concern motivates our reading will Kierkegaard be glad of our attention.[3]

Trepidation notwithstanding, the work of Kierkegaard remains alluring precisely because of his own passion. In struggling with the work of the enigmatic Dane one joins him in the struggle with life's most important questions: 'What does it mean to exist?', 'How does one come to know the Truth?', 'Can it be true that God has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ?', 'How then should we live?' These are existential questions. It belongs to the essence of Kierkegaard's counsel on such matters that discussion of them cannot be resolved by their being incorporated into a 'system', cannot be understood except that understanding arise out of one's own existence before God and cannot be drawn to a conclusion only to be left behind. No propositional resolution of these questions is available. We are invited instead to an understanding of the Truth through faith, which is to say that we are invited to embark upon a life in relationship with God. The understanding of Truth is not a matter of formulating a proposition but of trusting one's life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are cautioned, accordingly, that if such faith is scorned then understanding is lost. It will be our task in this study to contrast the counsel of Kierkegaard with the epistemological recommendations of 'modernity'.

During Kierkegaard's lifetime (1813-1855) Denmark was entering the era of modernity in which theological inquiry was variously subjected to the strictures of Rationalism, Romanticism and Historical-critical method.[4] Whatever the gains brought by modernity, and Kierkegaard was ready to acknowledge them, they also led inexorably to a misconstrual of Christian faith. Whether or not Christianity itself is true, Kierkegaard contended that modernity's claim to have assimilated Christianity within its own 'superior' world-view is undoubtedly false. It is false because the reality of the incarnate

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[2] See, for example, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing,* trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1956) p. 27. I acknowledge the contemporary inappropriateness of masculine pronouns when one wishes to refer to both genders. I have, however, found it necessary to retain such pronouns when close attention is being paid to citations of Kierkegaard's own work and attempt to correct the imbalance by using feminine pronouns elsewhere.

[3] Paul Holmer expresses the same attitude when he warns against any effort to systematise Kierkegaard and argues that the final object of Kierkegaardian scholarship is not *merely* to understand but to enter into the existential possibilities which Kierkegaard recommends in his Christian works. See 'On Understanding Kierkegaard' *A Kierkegaard Critique,* eds. Howard. A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper 1962) 40-53, p. 48

[4] This 'Golden Age' in Danish culture has been comprehensively chronicled by Bruce Kirmmse in *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1990).

Son of God who comes among us as a lowly servant confounds our own pretensions to omniscience and resists assimilation to our preconceived notions of what is and is not possible for God. 'No philosophy, no mythology and no historical knowledge' says Climacus, can either replace or be the means of attaining the Truth which is disclosed in Jesus Christ.[5]

There is a tale told of a traveller in Ireland who asks of a local inhabitant the way to Connemara. To this inquiry the local replies, 'If I were going to Connemara I wouldn't be going from here'. Behind the humour lies an insight which is fundamental to Kierkegaard's appreciation of the problem at hand. The greatest obstacle, thinks Kierkegaard, to becoming a Christian in the present age is the illusion that the presuppositions of modern thought are a good place to start. Of course, like the traveller seeking directions to Connemara, those committed to the presuppositions of modernity cannot but begin from where they are, but in Kierkegaard's view they must begin by going backwards. Only when disabused of their allegiance to presuppositions which preclude their becoming Christian will they be enabled to apprehend the Truth which is disclosed by God. The problem with becoming a Christian in the modern age is not, in the first place, a matter of getting clear about the content of faith. Simply to proclaim the 'what' of faith without regard for the situation of the audience presumes the adequacy of the interpretive frameworks within which the proclamation will be received. Recognising that such a presumption cannot be justified, Kierkegaard proposes that the first task of Christian communication is to become clear about the 'how'. Such clarity is attained, however, only with God's help, only under the impact of revelation itself. The self-disclosure of God does not leave us as we were but engenders an epistemological transformation which enables us to see and understand the Truth. It is the purpose of *Philosophical Fragments* to elucidate the logic by which this transformation may take place.

Although it is Johannes Climacus rather than Kierkegaard who spells out the logic of Christian conversion, it is a logic to which Kierkegaard himself assents. The disclaimer in 'A First and Last Declaration'[6] notwithstanding, we should not assume that there is nothing in the pseudonymous works to which Kierkegaard himself might consent. This

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[5] See *Philosophical Fragments,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985) p. 109.

[6] Appended to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* 2 Vols. eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992) Kierkegaard here declares that 'in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me'. (Subsequent references will be to *Postscript* and to volume one unless otherwise stated.)

applies especially to Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus to whose works Kierkegaard attached his name as editor thus indicating a closer relationship with them than to others of the pseudonyms. While it is necessary when studying the various pseudonymous works to give consideration to the particular role being played by each pseudonym, it may nevertheless be said in general that the pseudonyms are employed to represent life views which Kierkegaard himself does not share.[7] Typically these are the aesthetic and the ethical views. With Climacus and Anti-Climacus, however, the situation becomes a great deal more subtle for these authors speak a truth to which Kierkegaard himself assents but from a viewpoint which is not his own. Climacus, on the one hand, is not a Christian while Anti-Climacus, on the other, is said to be a Christian 'to an extraordinary degree'. Between them Kierkegaard locates himself, confessing allegiance to the truth of Christian faith but well aware of his short-comings in giving existential expression to that allegiance. At decisive points in the respective writings the difference in view-point between the three authors gives rise to quite different expressions of the same fundamental truth. Where Climacus speaks of the leap of faith, for example, Anti-Climacus speaks of grace and Kierkegaard himself of the assistance of the Holy Spirit. All three, however, recognise that the transition from unbelief to faith is not a natural progression. Or again, where Climacus refers to the incarnation as paradoxical and absurd, Anti-Climacus calls it an offense which must be passed through, and Kierkegaard proclaims that for faith the absurd is no longer absurd. Again, although understood differently, there is a mutual recognition that the incarnation confounds the wisdom of humankind. Throughout their respective deliberations the ground which is shared between the three authors is a vital concern with how one is to engage in an authentic Christian existence before God. It is one of the marks of this common interest that each author pursues this concern in strong dependence upon the material of the New Testament.

We suggested above that authentic Christian faith is characterised by a transformation of the individual under the impact of revelation. In the New Testament this transformation is called *metanoia* (*μετανοια*) and entails the renewal of our minds. Without this renewal human beings remain alienated from God, and his appearance in the form of a servant remains a scandal and an offense. We shall attempt to demonstrate in the chapters which follow that the account of Christian conversion given by Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments* and approved by Kierkegaard in his own writings, is a faithful elucidation of the New Testament understanding of *metanoia* and remains a pertinent challenge to the

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[7] Hence the injunction in 'A First and Last Declaration' to do Kierkegaard the courtesy of citing the name of the appropriate pseudonym rather than his own when quoting from the pseudonymous works.

persistent attempts of moderns and post-moderns alike who propose to learn the Truth on quite different terms.

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A PROJECT OF THOUGHT

Although there are still commentators who refuse to acknowledge the Christian purpose of the work of Søren Kierkegaard[1] it is nevertheless well known that Kierkegaard himself claimed that the entire corpus was primarily concerned with the question 'How do I become a Christian?' Conscious, of the enigmatic nature of his work Kierkegaard wrote what he called 'A Report to History' which he directed should be published posthumously under the title, 'The Point of View of my Work as an Author'. While it is true that this 'report to history' is just as much the subject of scholarly debate and disagreement as any of the other works (becoming the centre, in B. Nelson's words, of the entire dispute about his authorship[2]), the resulting confusion can fairly be attributed to scholarly obfuscation rather than to Kierkegaardian ambiguity. There remains room, it is true, for debate about the nature and effectiveness of the strategies which Kierkegaard adopted in his work and which are outlined in *The Point of View* but there is no equivocation in his claim that 'I am and was a religious author' and that 'the whole of my work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem of becoming a Christian'.[3]

The problem is, in Kierkegaard's view, particularly acute in Christendom where it is possible to imagine that one is already Christian by virtue of belonging to a reputedly Christian culture. While in our own age Christendom has largely passed away the essential problem of failing to distinguish properly between Christianity and culture remains. The call to discipleship has always to battle, not only against the counterclaims of what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic and the ethical ways of life, but also against those distortions, found both in scholarly treatise and in popular view, which present Christianity as the confirmation of our own religious intuitions. The problem then, is not only, in faith, to become a Christian but also to proceed correctly to a knowledge of what

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[1] J. Sperna Weiland has written of Kierkegaard that 'he is one of the most maltreated thinkers of the last centuries. The fact that he is a Christian is again and again neglected or mentioned in a footnote, or it is considered an aspect which one need not take into account.' *Philosophy of Existence and Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co. 1951) p. 80. The maltreatment accorded Kierkegaard by non-Christian existentialists to whom Weiland refers is currently being surpassed by postmodernist interpreters of Kierkegaard. The enormity of this latter effort is ably critiqued by Sylvia Walsh in 'Kierkegaard and Postmodernism' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991) 113-122.

[2] Cited in H. A. Smit, *Kierkegaard's Pilgrimage of Man* (Delft: W. D. Meinema 1965) p. 14.

[3] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author.* trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1939).

Christianity is. We shall see, however, that in Kierkegaard's view faith and knowledge are not two separate tasks, indeed they are not tasks at all, but are received as a single gift of grace in that 'Moment' of encounter which is both ontologically and epistemologically transformative. To employ one of Kierkegaard's own metaphors; understanding Christianity is like learning to swim: it is only when entering the water, when setting out upon the life of faith, that one begins to understand. Kierkegaard had no respect for the fashionable philosophic detachment which purports to evaluate Christian faith without ever venturing out into the water and which responds to the challenges of life with a haughty disclaimer: 'My esteemed contemporaries, you misunderstand me. I am not a participant at all; I am outside; like a little silent Spanish 's' I am outside.'[4] For Kierkegaard such detachment is no virtue. Rather it is a sign of alienation for it constitutes the rejection of revelation and the sinful presumption that we shall have to do with God, not on the basis of grace, but under conditions which we ourselves shall determine.

It is true that a great many Kierkegaardian commentators do not see the matter in this way.[5] It will be my purpose in this chapter, therefore, to investigate the account of the transition from unbelief to faith which is presented in chapter one of *Philosophical Fragments* and to consider the extent to which Kierkegaard himself approves the *ordo salutis* proposed by his pseudonym Johannes Climacus. It is evident, of course, that the *Fragments* is a strongly polemical work. It is not an attempt to set out, as if on neutral ground, the way of Christian faith but is rather a profound rebuttal of the view that becoming a Christian was a work of the intellect. The famous insistence upon the paradoxical nature of Christian faith[6] is designed to call a halt to the hubris of reason, to set as Kant had done, although in a quite different way, the limits beyond which reason may not pass.[7] While it is often assumed, and it must be admitted that proof texts can be

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[4] *Either/Or* II. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987) p. 171.

[5] Cornelio Fabro is among the more polemical of those who contend that Kierkegaard presents faith as a human accomplishment. In my view Fabro mistakes Kierkegaard's undoubted insistence that faith is a genuine possibility for all people for the view that such possibility is grounded in some human capacity. See Cornelio Fabro, 'Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic' *A Kierkegaard Critique,* eds. Johnson and Thulstrup (1962) 156-206.

[6] I recognise and agree with Alastair McKinnon's observation that the term 'paradox' belongs almost exclusively to the pseudonymous authors and is rarely used by Kierkegaard himself. See McKinnon, 'Søren Kierkegaard' in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West,* eds. Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Patrick Sherry and Stephen T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985) 181-214, p. 191f. We shall discuss this further below but in the meantime I simply claim that the category of paradox, although used almost exclusively by Climacus, was a central feature of Kierkegaard's attempts to introduce Christianity into Christendom.

[7] Central to this difference between Kierkegaard and Kant is the observation made by Merold Westphal that Johannes Climacus 'portrays Reason not as the weakness of finite humanity but as the wrongness of fallen humanity'. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University

adduced in support, that Kierkegaard insists upon the opposition of faith and reason I would claim that his concern is rather to show that faith is something altogether different from the conclusion of a reasoned argument.[8] The opposition is not so much between faith and reason as between faith and extravagant estimations of reason's capacity.[9] Commenting on Kierkegaard's alleged rejection of metaphysics, Gregor Malantschuk observes that '[Kierkegaard] strove, not so much against metaphysics as such but against the overstepping of the boundaries of its competence.'[10] Kierkegaard had nothing but contempt for the view, for which he held Hegel responsible, that reason enabled us to view the world *sub specie aeterni,* from the point of view of eternity.[11]

Climacus and Kierkegaard

Let us turn then to *Philosophical Fragments* itself where the very foundations of the Hegelian view are rigorously called into question. As we have noted, *Philosophical Fragments* is attributed by Kierkegaard to the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus. Such attribution, because it comes from the name of a seventh century monk who wrote the celebrated *Ladder of Paradise,* confirms that we are on the right track in interpreting the work as offering an account of the way of salvation, but it also introduces the complication that Kierkegaard dissociated himself from the views of all his

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Press 1987) p. 114. Westphal's observation concerning Climacus applies equally well to the understanding of Kierkegaard himself.

[8] Commensurate with this view, James Collins has written, 'Kierkegaard sometimes speaks as though the intellect were positively excluded from the act of faith. Yet all that his opposition to idealism and pantheism requires is that faith not be regarded as the necessary outcome of a demonstrative process, in which reason alone is operative.' See James Collins, 'Faith and Reflection in Kierkegaard' *A Kierkegaard Critique* eds. Johnson and Thulstrup (1962) p. 149f.

[9] It has been a matter of some debate whether *Forstand* as used in *Philosophical Fragments* ought to be translated as 'reason' or 'understanding'. I share the view of David Swenson that the Kantian distinction between *Vernunft* and *Verstand* is irrelevant to the purpose of *Philosophical Fragments* which is surely to show that faith is not a work of the intellect however the operations of the intellect may be differentiated. I owe my awareness of the debate, which was largely conducted in private correspondence between David Swenson and Walter Lowrie, to the very full discussion of the matter by Andrew J. Burgess. See his 'Forstand in the Swenson-Lowrie Correspondence and in the "Metaphysical Caprice"' *International Kierkegaard Commentary vol.7 'Philosophical Fragments' and 'Johannes Climacus'* (hereafter IKC 7) ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press 1994) 109-128. See also C. S. Evans, *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1992) p. 188, n.7, who similarly supports Swenson's position.

[10] Gregor Malantschuk, 'Das Verhältnis zwischen Wahrheit und Wirklichkeit in Søren Kierkegaards existentiellem Denken' *Orbis Litterarum* X (1955) 166-177, p. 171.

[11] Kierkegaard frequently used this phrase rather than the more usual *sub specie aeternitatis.* Concerning this Walter Lowrie comments '...since S. K was a good Latinist and the form he uses is an agreeable one... and since friends in the faculties of Classics and Philosophy at Princeton unite in counselling me not to alter it, I do not presume to do so.' See Lowrie's notes to David Swenson's translation of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1944) p. 560, n.1. We shall follow Lowrie's policy and thus Kierkegaard's usage throughout this work

pseudonymous authors.[12] If we take Climacus at his word, therefore, we may yet be some distance from Kierkegaard's own estimation of the matter. It is my own view, however, that it is a mistake to assume that there can be no agreement between Climacus and Kierkegaard himself. The disclaimer and the pseudonymous attributions are part of Kierkegaard's scheme to take the reader unawares, to come at the matter indirectly and 'wound from behind' as he himself puts it.[13] So while we may accept Kierkegaard's insistence that he does not share the perspective of Climacus, or indeed of any of the pseudonymous authors, we need not take this as implying that such authors do not, on occasion, speak the truth. Climacus, it is claimed, is someone who knows what Christianity is but who is not yet a Christian. He thus views the transition to faith from quite a different point of view than one, like Kierkegaard himself, who has already made such a transition. The view of Climacus, commensurate with his name, is indeed like that of a mountain climber, but of a climber who stands at the beginning of his ascent while Kierkegaard himself surveys the same mountain from a much higher point. It is in this respect, I think, that Kierkegaard claims not to share the views of his pseudonyms, none of whom, except Anti-Climacus, are Christians as Kierkegaard is. Concerning Anti-Climacus on the other hand, Kierkegaard comments that he is 'a Christian on an extraordinarily high level'.[14] Thus Kierkegaard wrote in his Journal that he was below Anti-Climacus but above Johannes Climacus thereby indicating that Anti-Climacus too, although a Christian, beholds a different aspect than does Kierkegaard himself.[15] Louis Pojman is thus correct to argue that 'what distinguishes Climacus from Kierkegaard is simply perspective. Kierkegaard writes about Christianity as insider; Climacus writes about it from the outside, as something to be entertained; but both agree on how one becomes a Christian and on the content of Christianity.'[16]

Not all Kierkegaardian scholars will agree with the position on the pseudonyms which I have outlined here. An adequate defence of this position, however, must rest upon whether the account I have given of the relationship between Johannes Climacus and

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[12] See the famous disclaimer already referred to.

[13] *Point of View*, p. 97.

[14] *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers,* eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1967-78) 6/6433, X^1 A 517 (1849). The first reference denotes the volume and entry number in the Hong translation. This is followed by the appropriate reference in the Danish edition of the *Papirer* and the year in which the passage was written. This format will be followed in all subsequent references to the *Journals.*

[15] The perspectival account of the pseudonymous authorship is to be distinguished from that form of relativism which despairs of knowing the truth. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous exploration of alternative life-views is fundamentally a quest for the conditions under which it *is* possible to apprehend and to tell the truth.

[16] Louis Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press 1984) p. 90.

Søren Kierkegaard can be consistently and plausibly applied. That judgement is the prerogative of the reader at the conclusion of this study. In the meantime we shall conform to Kierkegaard's own request that we should do him the courtesy of not presuming his agreement with any of the views which are met with in the pseudonyms. Such agreement as there may nevertheless be must be discovered rather than presumed.

Before we continue I ought to acknowledge what should be readily apparent, namely, that the argument I have presented so far is fundamentally contradictory. Earlier in this chapter I suggested that knowing what Christianity is and becoming a Christian cannot be separated. The epistemological transformation by which we come to understand what Christianity is is given as gift — the same gift by which we also receive that faith which constitutes authentic Christian existence.[17] Now we have before us, as author of *Philosophical Fragments,* Johannes Climacus, a man who confesses that he is not a Christian and yet who, it is said, understands what Christianity is. Paradox, it seems, abounds. Or if not paradox then perhaps irony. The claim that Climacus understands Christianity apparently undermines the very position which we will find him proposing. At the conclusion of the chapter, however, we shall discover that the irony is turned upon ourselves as also the questions, 'Do you understand?' and 'How?'

Some logical distinctions in epistemology

In the meantime let us commence with our reading of *Philosophical Fragments*. Climacus begins by recalling the Socratic question of how the individual might come to know the Truth.[18] The sophisticates of Kierkegaard's own age, enthralled as they were with the speculative idealism of the Hegelian school, were confident that they knew the answer to this question but Johannes Climacus sets out to consider, by way of a 'thought experiment', what might be the case if the idealist account of the matter were mistaken. Thus in response to every epistemological tenet of the idealist philosophy Climacus presents its opposite in order that it may be clearly apprehended whether a genuine alternative is possible. We should note that the question of learning the Truth is not

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17 Thus rendering inapplicable, in the case of Christianity, the distinction sometimes made between knowledge by aquaintance and knowledge by description.

18 I am in total agreement with Stephen Evans when he explains that 'It is very soon evident that by truth Climacus means something very significant. He is not talking about 2+2=4, but the truth which it is essential for human beings to have, the truth whose possession would make human life ultimately worthwhile. We might as well signify the specialness of the concept by speaking of "the Truth" in cases where this special kind of truth is in mind, as the original English translation of *Fragments* did, rather than just truth.' Evans, *Passionate Reason,* p. 13. I would add that the Christological overtones which are elsewhere unmistakable are lost by using 'truth' rather than 'Truth'. Accordingly I shall employ the upper case even in otherwise direct citations of the more recent English translation.

merely one of academic interest. For both the Idealists and for Climacus, the question has soteriological overtones. Both will concur with Jesus' assertion that 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:32) but they offer quite different and incompatible accounts of how this liberation may be understood to take place.

We begin, not with Hegel but with Socrates, for although Hegel was a novel thinker in terms of the scope and audacity of his claims he was not entirely original. Climacus has noticed that the foundations of Hegel's project had been laid in a more coherent and much less pretentious way in the thought of Socrates. In particular, Climacus turns his attention to a discussion Socrates is reputed to have had with a man called Meno. Socrates, as is well known, loved nothing better than to enter into debate with his fellow Athenians, questioning and counter-questioning until the truth was laid bare. In one such debate his friend Meno asked him, 'Can the truth be learned?' It is a simple question but as Socrates well knew it is deceptively simple for if we do not know the truth how will we know what to look for and how will we recognise it when we come across it? The problem thus identified is how to overcome the apparent impasse: clearly we human beings are not omniscient, at least not on the face of it, and yet if we do not know what we do not know how can we possibly go about discovering it? Socrates thinks through the difficulty by means of the doctrine of recollection whereby it is asserted that the truth is already within us. Truth is implanted in the immortal soul and, through a careful process of reasoning, can successfully be called to mind. The point is demonstrated when Socrates summons a slave boy and gives him a lesson in geometry. Simply by asking him a series of questions, to which the boy provides answers, the boy is enabled to recognise the truth of the theory of Pythagoras. Socrates told the boy nothing — he only asked him questions. The conclusion drawn is that the boy must have already possessed the truth. The role of the teacher, then, is to act *maieutically* (like a midwife), bringing to birth the truth that lies within the learner. Reason, it is claimed, is the condition which makes recollection of the Truth possible.

According to this Socratic pedagogical theory, the teacher is merely accidental, and bears no essential relationship to the truth learned. In other words, the slave boy, having learnt his lessons in geometry requires nothing further from Socrates. He especially does not require the continuing presence of Socrates in order to appropriate the newly recollected truth. Just as the teacher is accidental, so too is the historical occasion in which the truth was recollected. It is a vanishing point of no enduring significance for in the moment the truth is recollected it also becomes apparent that the truth has been possessed from all eternity. In respect of our learning the truth it is not what happens in history that is

decisive but what happens in our minds. Climacus comments, 'In the Socratic view, every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge.'[19]

This then is the Socratic story. But is it the only possibility? Climacus continues his experiment by setting out what would be the case if Socrates is wrong. Step by step he considers the logical opposite to the Socratic view. To begin with, he muses, we would have to assume that the learner does not possess the truth. The truth is not latent within the human soul, needing only to be brought to consciousness. Rather the learner *exists* in untruth.[20] Climacus decides that we should call this state of untruth 'sin' for the learner, must be responsible for his or her own error. This condition of sin, Climacus notes, is a kind of bondage. The learner may appear to be free since, at least in respect of his sin, he is a 'self-made man'. But the price he pays for choosing to flee from the Truth is the loss of his freedom. Climacus explains with a parable: Suppose two hostile armies faced each other, and there came a knight whom both sides invited to join; but he chose the one side, was defeated and taken prisoner. He cannot then offer himself to the other side on the same terms as originally obtained. He has made his choice and now is bound. So also with the sinner claims Climacus. We must remember that this is just a thought experiment. Climacus is not insisting that his alternative is correct. He is only considering what would be the case if the Socratic view is wrong.

Climacus continues: if the learner exists in untruth then a particular kind of teacher is required. The teacher cannot be merely a midwife, cannot merely assist the learner to bring forth the truth that is within. Rather the teacher must give the learner the truth. Similarly, if reason is not the means by which the Truth is learned then the means or condition must also be given. So the teacher gives not only the Truth but also the condition to understand it. What shall we call this condition, wonders Climacus again. Later in the book he considers that we should call it faith.[21] And what shall we call the teacher who gives not only the Truth but also the condition for understanding it?

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[19] *Fragments,* p. 11.

[20] Stephen Evans' assertion that 'Climacus makes it perfectly clear... that he does not view guilt as ontological...' seems to contradict Climacus' own insistence in *Philosophical Fragments* that sin concerns being and is overcome by way of a new birth. Commenting later on the liberation from sin Climacus writes, 'But this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be' is indeed the transition of birth' (p. 19). This seems an unambiguous admission that sin is a matter of ontological significance. I agree with Evans that existence cannot be blamed for the individual's guilt, and this is certainly the point made in the passage from the *Postscript* which he quotes, but this is not to say that sin does not have ontological implications or that guilt is not an ontological state. See Evans, *Kierkegaard's 'Fragments' and 'Postscript' The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1983) p. 178.

[21] *Fragments,* p. 59.

> Let us call him a *savior,* Climacus writes, for he does indeed save the learner from unfreedom, saves him from himself. Let us call him a *deliverer*, for he does indeed deliver the person who had imprisoned himself, and no one is so dreadfully imprisoned, and no captivity is so impossible to break out of as that in which the individual holds himself captive! And yet, even this does not say enough, for by his unfreedom he had indeed become guilty of something, and if that teacher gives him the condition and the Truth, then he is, of course, a *reconciler* who takes away the wrath that lay over the incurred guilt.[22]

Climacus suggests further that we call this whole process *conversion.* Conversion describes the moment in which the learner takes leave of his former state. There is no taking leave, he continues, without feeling sorrow. Yet in this case the sorrow is over the learner's having been so long in his former state. Such sorrow, Climacus decides to call *repentance*. With transparent enthusiasm now for the Biblical allusions which lie ready to hand, Climacus draws his project to a close with the suggestion that this whole process of discovering the Truth is like a new birth by which the learner enters the world a second time. How can this be? This is, of course, the question of Nicodemus and he with his incredulity, stands as representative of all human understanding which is unable to figure it out. Here then is another paradox, Reason can see the coherence of either view — the Socratic and the Climacean — can see that they are logical alternatives, and yet reason has no grounds on which to decide between them. This paradox in itself might cause the reader to doubt whether reason should be the final criterion of all truth.

It is to be expected of course, that there will be contrasts between a Socratic and a Christian understanding of how one learns the Truth. If the establishment of these contrasts was the sole purpose of the *Fragments* then we could readily nod our assent and move on. The challenge, however, of the *Fragments* is the implicit suggestion by Kierkegaard that the religion of Christendom in its essential elements, resembles far more closely the philosophy of Socrates than it does the Christianity of the New Testament. Certainly this was the case in respect of the Hegelian revision of Christianity which so impressed Kierkegaard's contemporaries. It was also true of the Romantic redefinition of Christian faith exemplified in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Both the speculative and the Romantic approach to Christian faith will be considered further in chapters two and three below.

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22 *Fragments,* p. 17.

The contemporary prevalence of the 'Socratic'

Before proceeding to that task, however, we shall consider the challenge represented in Climacus' position to the account of conversion given in the traditional western *ordo salutis.* In the west it has commonly been proposed that repentance precedes personal transformation. By this account grace and forgiveness are presumed to be conditional upon human contrition. This is the view advanced by the medieval scholastic tradition and which could lead, in Luther's view, only to despair.[23] The implication of this particular *ordo salutis* is, of course, that we have within ourselves the capacity to recognise our own sin and to know the truth about our own sinful identity. Having made this discovery we are then ready to receive what God has to offer of truth and transformation. But according to Climacus such a notion returns us to the Socratic. It implies that at least in respect of the truth about ourselves we are not bound after all but can see for ourselves the truth that we exist in untruth. Here we see the emergence of a principle of natural theology with its confidence in the power of human reason which, while maintained alongside a doctrine of the fall, nevertheless implies that we have not fallen so far as to spoil our epistemic capacities.

Not least, however, among the reasons for Kierkegaard's insistence upon an 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and humanity was the concern to point out that humanity is separated from God not only by an ontological gulf but also by an epistemic distance which reason does not have the capacity to overcome.[24] In chapter two of the *Fragments* Climacus asks 'what then is the difference [between God and humanity]?' and he answers, 'Indeed, what else but sin?'[25] Sin, as we have seen, designates the state of existence in untruth, an existence in which we are separated from the truth about ourselves and about God. It is for this reason that Anti–Climacus, Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym, insists that the opposite to sin is not virtue, as is commonly

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[23] A profound account of Luther's struggle against the *ordo salutis* of the scholastic tradition is given by George Yule in his essay, 'Luther's Attack on the Latin Heresy' which appears in *Christ in our Place,* eds. Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (Allison Park PA: Pickwick, and Exeter: Paternoster 1989) 224-252. Although Yule makes no reference to Kierkegaard, there are remarkable parallels between Luther's views and the *ordo salutis* presented in *Philosophical Fragments.*

[24] It may be questioned whether the proposition concerning the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and humanity is, in Kierkegaard, itself a product of natural theology, i.e. that it is an *a priori* assertion of reason. Climacus, however, explicitly rejects this notion when he writes, 'The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since as we have seen it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god...' And further, 'Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is absolutely different from him.' (*Fragments,* p. 46)

[25] *Fragments,* p. 47.

assumed, but faith.[26] Overcoming sin is not a matter of being good where formerly we were bad but is rather the reconciliation of the individual with God.[27] A proper knowledge of sin, is not then a matter of popular wisdom but, as James Collins puts it, 'remains obscure until [it is] illuminated by the Christian good news of [humanity's] call to share freely in the divine life, through Christ.'[28] Anti-Climacus says further,

> It is specifically the concept of sin, the teaching about sin, that most decisively differentiates Christianity qualitatively from paganism, and this is also why Christianity very consistently assumes that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is; in fact, it assumes that there has to be a revelation from God to show what sin is... What a dangerous objection it would be against Christianity if paganism had a definition of sin that Christianity would have to acknowledge as correct.[29]

The point is, quite simply, that the nature of human sin is not self-evident but is laid bare through the costly cruciform encounter of God with human sinfulness.

Here the starkness of the contrast between speculative idealism and the Climacean alternative is focussed on the question of our true humanity. Is it the case that there is little to separate us from the glory of God or have we, through sin, fallen so far short of that glory that our need is not so much of one like Hegel who offers a friendly reminder of our essential unity with God but rather of one who will be our saviour? We are familiar, of course with the Hegelian form of hubris concerning human capacity whereby the difference between God and humanity was completely dissolved but let us observe, as an initial indicator of the contemporary pervasiveness of Socratic assumptions, two

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26 *Sickness Unto Death,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980) p. 82.

27 Although Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the individual was a necessary corrective to the confusions of his time Christian theology must recognise that the overcoming of sin is not a matter for the individual alone but ultimately concerns the whole of the created order.

28 James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (London: Secker and Warburg 1954) p. 212. Louis Dupré makes the same point; 'Without God's revelation no consciousness of sin is possible. In order to become conscious of his fall, man needs an intervention of the transcendent.' *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (New York: Sheed and Ward 1963) p. 78. William C. Davis on the other hand, is mistaken in his claim that sin-consciousness is represented in the *Fragments* as a pre-requisite for obtaining the 'condition'. 'Kierkegaard on the Transformation of the Individual in Conversion' *Religious Studies* 28 (1992) p. 154f. Davis' assertion is in direct conflict with Climacus' indication that sin-consciousness is acquired 'through the "Moment"', *Fragments* p. 51, which oddly enough, Davis quotes in support of his view. J. Sperna Weiland, similarly alleges that Kierkegaard sometimes presents sin-consciousness as a pre-requisite of faith. Kierkegaard certainly does think that an awareness of one's sin is a *conditio sine qua non* of faith in Christ but I do not find him suggesting, as Weiland alleges, that sin-consciousness is possible apart from Christ. See Weiland, *Philosophy of Existence and Christianity,* p. 117. For further elucidation of Kierkegaard's view as I have presented it, see Mark Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 268f.

29 *Sickness Unto Death,* pp. 89 and 90.

instances of 'Christian' proclamation which, while not succumbing to the pantheistic tendencies of Hegelian thought, nevertheless assert, in common with Hegel, that at least in the exercise of our rational capacities there is something which connects us immediately with the divine.

My first example is drawn from the ill-considered but nonetheless influential blusterings of American tele-evangelists. Typically such people leave us in no doubt about their belief in the sinfulness of humanity but they are equally insistent that the true nature of human sinfulness is available for all to see. In bringing people to a recognition of how far we have fallen short of the glory of God the Socratic mode of instruction is deemed sufficient. Accordingly one hears the call from the evangelist's podium, that 'if you want God to come into your life, the first thing you gotta do is repent of your sins.' Climacus proposes, on the other hand, that we are in no position to repent of our sin unless God has already 'come into our lives' imparting that condition, which enables us to see and understand the truth, not only about God but also about ourselves. It is only in the light of that Truth that repentance becomes, not only appropriate but also possible. In Ephesians 2:1-10 the matter is put quite unambiguously: 'You were dead through the trespasses and sins... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...' Sin causes death and because the dead are unable to do anything for themselves, nothing short of a resurrection is required in order that sinful humanity may be saved. The raising of sinners to new life is an act of God, a matter of grace for which no human act of intellect or otherwise is able to prepare the way. The priority of God's salvific action is affirmed by Kierkegaard in the *Journals* where he writes, 'heterodoxly one may say that conversion precedes and conditions the forgiveness of sins; orthodoxly one may say: the forgiveness of sins precedes conversion and strengthens men truly to be converted.'[30] Here again we find agreement between Climacus and Kierkegaard himself.

My second example which, also because of its widespread influence ought to be taken seriously, is more sophisticated if no less misguided. There are an increasing number of contemporary theologians who, out of admirable concern for the salvation of those whose religious tradition and upbringing has not brought them into encounter with Jesus Christ, consider that the way to affirm God's saving love for the whole human race is to point out the striking similarities in the basic insights of various religious traditions.

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[30] *Journals*, 2/1206, VII[1] A 167 (1846).

Usually, of course, the traditions have received their impetus from a founding figure or succession of figures whose teachings have become paradigmatic but it is the teachings rather than the teacher which now provide the key to salvation and no great significance need be attributed to the occasion of their introduction to human thought. A selective comparison of such teachings yields the judgement of a remarkable correspondence between the various traditions. Whether this is a genuine judgement or rather a prejudgment need not concern us here. In any event the procedure results in the conclusion that, if not exactly on the same track, all religious traditions are at least heading in roughly the same direction. It is supposed that this is the right direction and *ergo*, our diverse religious journeys will culminate in salvation for us all. Such arguments are to be found in a great many thinkers but the works of John Hick, Keith Ward and Wilfred Cantwell-Smith are easily accessible and reasonably representative.[31] My concern at this point is not to get into a debate about the theology of religions but simply to point out that these kinds of argument rely on the Socratic rather than the Climacean understanding of how human beings may gain a knowledge of salvific truth. The critical factor in the *ordo salutis* implied, though never clearly spelled out, by Hick, Ward, Cantwell-Smith and others is the basic reliability of commonly shared human insights concerning both the divine and the situation of human persons in relation to the divine. Typically, the reliability of such insights is never questioned.

Considering the alternatives

We have before us two alternatives. Either human reason and understanding is a critical precursor of any action that God might take in respect of our salvation or it is not. Either the role of some teacher or saviour is incidental in our salvific transition or it is not. Either historical contingencies are of decisive importance with respect to salvation or they are not. In *Philosophical Fragments* these are presented simply as alternatives. The matter is not decided. Let us go on then, to consider some of the implications of each view.

The position of human reason in the Socratic view should by now be clearly enough apparent. Reason, if not infallible, is credited with a very high degree of reliability. With reason among our resources the problems of human existence are to be regarded as surmountable and that by dint of human effort alone. In respect of our relation to God, human understanding imparts a lightness of step to the homebound prodigal as he turns

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31 See for example, John Hick, *God has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan 1980), Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd. 1987) and Wilfred Cantwell-Smith *Towards a World Theology* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan 1981).

over in his mind the arguments that will see him restored to the father's favour. Some of those arguments might have occurred to him as he listened to the teaching of Jesus, the Nazarene of fond remembrance, but he feels sure that if he didn't exactly think of the arguments himself, he could have. There is no real need here to disguise the fact of his foolish departure from his father's house in the first place. Despite his ignominy he remains the son of his father and there don't appear to have been any epistemological ramifications of his unfortunate lapse. It is possible that as well as drawing inspiration from Jesus' teaching he now pictures Jesus as having walked the path before him. The thought of it buoys him up a little although it doesn't actually diminish the effort he must exert himself. So the prodigal returns home without the need of his father coming to meet him. His own capacities have enabled him to put the past behind him and now he stands ready for his fortunes to be restored. All the father has to do is to slay the fatted calf.[32]

Whether in the exhortations of the raging evangelists or in the more considered appeals of the advocates of a world theology, to recall our two earlier examples of Socratic epistemology, the focus upon human performance is in danger of presuming to manipulate God.[33] The story of the prodigal son as Jesus tells it, however, undermines the notion that relationship with God is due to anything other than freely given and unmerited divine love. Let us consider, then, whether Climacus' alternative is able to represent the position any better.

We have already noted the New Testament allusions in the Climacean alternative which give at least the semblance of a Christian position. We should beware, however, of any superficial judgement of the matter for at face value the Climacean view also has its problems. If it is the case, as Climacus suggests, that human reason is at a loss in respect of our relation to the Truth then what becomes of human reason in the conversion or new birth which is delineated in the *Philosophical Fragments* ? Are we to suppose, as is often alleged against Kierkegaard, that faith flies in the face of reason and is an ill-considered embrace of the absurd and the irrational? That is the first question. The second is related. What becomes of human freedom in conversion? If the individual in untruth can do nothing for themselves but must wait unawares upon the intervention of God then are we not left with a deterministic view of the process of conversion? Is the *Fragments* to be allied with 'Perkins' Golden Chaine' at least in the conclusion that the individual is at the

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32 The profound relevance of the parable of the prodigal son in this context is suggested by Helmut Thielicke in his *Modern Faith and Thought,* trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990) p. 385.

33 This general point is made by Michael Hardin, 'Reflections on the Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992) 325-340, p. 339.

mercy of God's 'terrible decrees'.

Avoiding determinism

The doctrine of predestination apparently troubled Kierkegaard greatly in his youth. The fatalistic attitude to life which the doctrine engendered was an intolerable consequence which Kierkegaard found himself unable to affirm.[34] It would be surprising then if, through his pseudonym (and Climacus is reputed to know what Christianity is), Kierkegaard represented the doctrine of predestination as an essential component of Christian dogma. I do not think, however, that he does. It is clear, although more so in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* than in *Philosophical Fragments,* that Johannes Climacus considers that the transition to faith does involve at some point, an element of human choice. The question is, returning to the *ordo salutis,* at what point? Climacus represents the individual as existing in untruth. The sinner does not have, in other words, the resources to appraise the Truth. Furthermore, the sinner is 'bound' which is to say that he or she is not in possession of the freedom to make any choices in respect of the Truth.[35] If choice is to be made then it is clearly not going to be at the outset. We cannot, as the Western *ordo salutis* would have it, decide to repent of our sins and then present ourselves before God in supplication of his grace. If Climacus is right, both knowledge and freedom are contingent upon the divine gift of the 'condition'. Free human response is just that — response — response to what has already, by grace, been done for us and disclosed to us. That human choice in the matter of becoming a Christian follows rather than precedes the individual's recreation by God is made explicit by Kierkegaard in a Journal entry from 1837 where he writes,

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[34] See *Journals,* 3/3542-3550.

[35] See *Fragments,* p. 15. This point seems to have eluded a great many Kierkegaardian commentators who, regarding Kierkegaard as the champion of human freedom, do not consider that the freedom, which he does indeed celebrate, is itself contingent upon the gift of God. Thus Cornelio Fabro can write, 'The act of faith is a 'leap' which faith alone can make, thanks to the 'choice' provided by freedom.' Fabro, 'Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic' p. 166. More recently Louis Pojman has been one of the most notable misinterpretters of Kierkegaard in this matter. His concern to charge Kierkegaard with volitionism rests on the mistaken assumption that the individual who does not believe is nevertheless free. As we have seen, Climacus explicitly states otherwise. See Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, 'Kierkegaard on Freedom and the Scala Paradisi' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985) 141-148, and 'Kierkegaard on Faith and Freedom' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 27 (1990) 41-61. M. Jamie Ferreira, a respondent to Pojman, recognises that Kierkegaard's understanding of human freedom is crucial here but still fails to take seriously Climacus' insistence that the natural man is 'bound' in his sinful state. See 'Kierkegaardian faith: "the condition" and the response' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 28 (1990) 63-79. David Wisdo, in recognising the bondage of the natural man, goes some way towards correcting the mistake but still denies that the epistemological ramifications of such bondage are important here. 'Kierkegaard on Belief, Faith and Explanation' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21 (1987) 95-114.

> There is a contrast of primary significance between Augustine and Pelagius. The former crushes everything in order to rebuild it again, the other addresses himself to man as he is. The first system, therefore, in respect to Christianity, falls into three stages: creation — the fall and a consequent condition of death and impotence; *a new creation — whereby man is placed in a position he can choose;* and then, if he chooses — Christianity. [36] (Italics mine)

It would seem that the point of human choice concerns, not our decision to try our hand at the judgement seat of God, but our decision to live, or to refuse to live, according to the transforming judgement that has already been made upon us, namely our justification through the reconciling death of Christ. Our freedom is a newly established freedom gifted to us by God and confronting us with the invitation to live in the light of the new reality that has already been accomplished. Kierkegaard himself declares, 'The atonement is the decisive thing. Then, on the other side, precisely out of joy over the reconciliation, comes an honest striving...'[37]

Climacus (and Kierkegaard) seems able to avoid the charge of determinism at least in so far as he retains a place for human choice. But the difficulty is not yet completely resolved. For it still appears to be the case that the individual is at the mercy of God in respect of receiving the condition. There does not appear to be anything that the individual can do to hasten that happy event. In a certain sense, of course, this is just what is the case. God cannot be manipulated. Grace and not necessity characterises the divine relationship with humankind.[38] How then does Climacus respond to the problem? Two parts to Climacus' position may be discerned in *Philosophical Fragments* both of which concern the manner of the divine self-communication. It is clear that 'the condition' for understanding the Truth is a gift from God which cannot be seized. Yet it is equally clear that the gift is not forced upon the individual. This is the point of Kierkegaard's parable to be discussed further below, in which a King who loves a lowly maiden resolves to become of lowly estate himself in order to win her love. This unambiguous allusion to the incarnation affirms that by coming to humanity in the form of a servant God makes it possible for humanity to respond to him but also allows for the possibility of rejection. Stephen Evans observes that here 'we have the paradox that man owes everything to God, yet man's freedom and selfhood are safeguarded by God himself.'[39] God has established the conditions by which the divine-human relationship

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36 *Journals,* 1/29, I A 101 (1837).
37 *Journals,* 1/983, X^2 A 208 (1849).
38 That there can be no necessity attached to God's engagement with human beings is not the least of the matters treated in the 'Interlude'. See *Fragments,* pp. 72-88.
39 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 108. The relationship between freedom and

may be fulfilled. Thus it is that Kierkegaard can say, 'Man's highest achievement is to let God be able to help him.'[40]

The second part of an answer to the allegation of determinism is, in the *Fragments*, only a passing hint but that it is a reliable indication of Kierkegaard's own position is borne out by other writings in the Kierkegaardian corpus.[41] The hint is given in chapter five of the *Fragments* which is entitled 'The Follower at Second Hand.' Here Climacus suggests that it was the task of the first followers of the God-Man to bear witness to succeeding generations. He writes,

> Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, 'We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died' — this is more than enough.[42]

And earlier,

> Just as the historical becomes the occasion for the contemporary to become a follower — by receiving the condition, please note, from the god himself (or otherwise we speak Socratically) — so the report of the contemporaries becomes the occasion for everyone coming later to become a follower — by receiving the condition, please note from the god himself.[43]

According to this hint from Climacus the occasion in which the condition is received, while certainly a miracle, is not to be regarded as a bolt from the blue. There is opportunity in the course of history to receive that which God has to give. God works, it appears, in cooperation with those who have been made witnesses, to bring the news of liberation to those who are in bondage. This would seem to be the position of the New Testament as well. The evangelical commission given to the disciples by the risen Christ can clearly be adduced in support of Climacus as also Paul's counsel in Romans 10: 14-17 where concern for those who have not yet heard of Christ is met with a renewed call

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dependence in Kierkegaard's work receives similarly sensitive treatment by David E. Roberts who writes, 'Freedom means inner honesty and openness and dependence means that forgiveness is given to me; I cannot simply invent it.' *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press 1957) p. 68.

[40] *Journals,* 1/54, V B 198 (1844).

[41] See particularly *Works of Love,* trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marion Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1946), in which the responsibility the Christian has to his or her neighbour is conceived of as the maieutic creation of the opportunity to receive 'the condition' from God which will enable the neighbour too to respond in faith to God's love.

[42] *Fragments,* p. 104.

[43] *Fragments,* p. 100.

for urgent proclamation of the good news. Indeed verse 17 of Romans 10 might well have been the inspiration behind the Climacean theme: 'So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.' In answer to the charge of determinism then, Climacus seems to suggest that while it is true that the individual is bound through sin and is unable to attain salvation, the good news of the gospel is that God is salvifically active both through that which has already been accomplished in the incarnation and through the testimony of those who already believe. The hearing of the testimony that sin has been forgiven is itself already an event of grace. Far from God's action in incarnation and witness being contingent upon the individual's first recognising and repenting of sin, God's action is the very means by which such recognition and repentance becomes possible. That much *is* determined by the love of God but, being set free by that news, the choice now confronts the individual whether he or she will believe. It must of course be emphasised that believing for Kierkegaard is not primarily a matter of intellectual assent but of existing, that is to say, living, in the light of the truth that has been revealed.[44]

According to the Climacean view then, the individual is not free in respect of her relation to the Truth but is set free by the one who is himself the Truth. Putting it another way, we might say that God acts towards us in a way which makes possible our communion with him. That communion is *made* possible reflects humanity's former bondage. That it is made *possible* is an indication of the gift of freedom and that it is *made possible* rather than imposed reflects the consistency of God's being as love which is prepared to suffer the grief of humanity's rejection.

Not least among the contrasts with the Socratic alternative is Climacus' notion that learning the Truth is for us human beings, a contingent matter. But, fortunately, it is contingent upon the grace of God who has come among us, both as a servant who gives himself as the Truth and as the Spirit who makes eloquent the testimony of those who are called to bear witness to the Truth. Out of concern, indeed out of love, for those in this life who do not hear and respond as the New Testament recommends, one might want to say more about the patience of divine love through which the readiness of God to give 'the condition' extends beyond history but enough has been said in the meantime, to allay fears that Climacus may have led us down Perkins' Golden Chaine. Certainly the explanation given here goes some way beyond Climacus' own account of the matter particularly in its employment of dogmatic concepts not found in *Philosophical*

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44 The relationship between believing and acting in Kierkegaard is helpfully elucidated by Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 209f. and will further occupy us below.

Fragments itself. I believe, however, that the explanation offered is consistent with the logic of conversion which is expounded by Climacus.

Faith and reason

Let us turn to the other problem which was identified earlier, namely, the question of what becomes of human reason in the process of conversion. Climacus is abundantly clear that reason does not gain us access to the temple, not even to the forecourt. Must it then be cast aside? The answer, I think, is both Yes and No! But to understand Kierkegaard's position on this question we shall need to consult, not only Climacus but also Kierkegaard himself through works published under his own name.

When discussing the matter of the pseudonymous authorship, we suggested that Climacus could be understood as one who stands at the foot of the mountain contemplating the ascent that lies before him. He is conscious, as we have seen, that he does not have the resources to make the ascent himself, but is reliant upon the assistance of 'the god'. He is troubled, however, by the requirement that he should renounce what resources he does have, particularly his capacity for understanding. It certainly looks to him, standing on the plain of unbelief, that his leap towards faith is also, quite disconcertingly, a leap away from all that he thought he knew and understood. From his point of view he must launch himself into the absurd, the paradoxical, the incomprehensible, for, according to human reason, this is what belief in the incarnation involves. There does seem to be, in the confession of a particular spatio-temporal presence of God, a confounding of what reason prescribes about the eternal and omnipresent being of God. The person who, on the grounds of human reason, is unable to believe may be correct in withholding assent to such a doctrine, but only if the final criterion of Truth is reason itself. Climacus considers, however, by way of the 'thought experiment' we have rehearsed, the possibility that human reason may not warrant such status. If it is the case, as Climacus surmises, that human beings exist in untruth then human understanding can hardly sustain the claim to final authority, although in ignorance it might well continue to do so. If, further, the God-Man comes forward with the claim to be, in person, the Truth as well as the Way and the Life, and does so truly, then human reason and human estimations of truth must certainly be abandoned or at least radically revised. Of course, if we exist in untruth, then we are in no position to judge this One who is the Truth but are rather judged by him and are called by him to a new existence, requiring us to take leave of the old. Here again, the human contribution is illuminated. We may, of course, decide to cling to the old ways of understanding. A

choice is required. Letting go of my trust in human reason, 'that is surely something', says Climacus, 'it is, after all, *meine Zuthat* [my contribution].'[45] But it is a contribution made in the light of the Truth which has been disclosed by God and which is apprehended by virtue of the condition which is given by God.

Thus, what for Climacus is only conjecture, Christian faith holds to be true, namely, that conversion involves something of a 'paradigm shift' for the understanding although that particular locution may rather understate the case. 'New birth' is better in the long run, I would suggest, so long as we understand, as should be obvious from the Nicodemus dialogue, that this transformation involves our understanding too. If this be the case then the God-Man does not require to be accommodated into an old framework, typically a dualist one, but rather becomes the cornerstone of a whole new way of understanding the world. It is, be it noted, a new *understanding*. Reason is reinstated in this new way of looking at the world but not to a position of final authority. It is reinstated as the means by which human beings, reconciled now to the reality of God's presence with them and for them, seek to interpret and articulate their experience of the world. Anselm's dictum about faith seeking understanding properly designates the role of reason in the service of that new relationship to the Truth which is characterised by and grounded upon interpersonal communion rather than detached objectivity. The case of Climacus is echoed in Barth's insistence that 'the theologian must answer directly and without qualification, without being ashamed of his naivety, that Jesus Christ is the one and entire truth through which he is shown how to think and speak.'[46] In support of Barth, Leslie Newbigin has written, 'A wider rationality which can justify the ways of God to man is not obtainable except on the other side of that radical change of perspective which has traditionally been called conversion.'[47] Climacus, or more particularly Kierkegaard himself in this instance, would not speak of a 'justification of the ways of God to man' since that suggests the reinstatement of reason to a position of final authority but that a radical change in perspective allows reason to be pressed into the service of faith certainly expresses the Kierkegaardian position. Elucidation of the logic of this transformation will be the primary focus of attention in chapters five and six below.

It might be suggested that the Climacean account would be well served by an explicit pneumatology. Certainly from the Christian point of view the transformation of our understanding is to be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. But we should

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45 *Fragments,* p. 43.
46 Cited in E. Busch, *Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press 1976) p. 435.
47 Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Centrality of Jesus for History' *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued,* ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1979) p. 209.

remember, firstly, that the setting out of the alternative to the Socratic position, which is Climacus' purpose, requires only that the condition for understanding the Truth is given by God and is not the native property of human beings. Climacus has thus achieved his goal and the contrast is no more explicit if we then go on to outline a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Stephen Evans comments, 'All he [Climacus] needs to include in his thought-experiment are some features that are adequate logically to delineate Christianity from its neighbors. Incompleteness is therefore no objection. It would be a different matter if Climacus' project could be shown to embody something incompatible with Christianity, however.'[48] In any event, Kierkegaard himself, the explicitly Christian author does offer an elucidation of the role of the Holy Spirit in his later work, *Judge for Yourself!* which acknowledges that the Christian did not so much leap from unbelief to faith but was borne across the gulf by the Holy Spirit of God. It is important to note that the term, 'the leap', so frequently cited as characterising Kierkegaard's view of conversion, is almost completely absent from the writings of the so called 'Christian authors', Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard himself.[49]

I have sketched here, only briefly, what I consider to be of crucial importance in the interpretation of the Kierkegaardian corpus. The problem of the pseudonymous authorship continues to confound many commentators but if we consider the pseudonyms as representative of unbelief who in their various ways consider the problem of becoming a Christian then we can easily understand Kierkegaard's own insistence that he does not share their view. The explicitly Christian authors, however, Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard himself, have undergone that transformation of the understanding which enables them to view the problems raised in the pseudonymous works in quite a different light. Thus for example, while the early pseudonymous authors, or as Kierkegaard calls them the aesthetic authors — the authors who judge according to immediate sensibility — regard the incarnation as a paradox or as the absurd, the Christian authors almost never use these terms of the God-Man. They continue to speak of Christ as an offense but the offense is to those who do not believe, to those who think they know the truth already.[50] Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard, on the other hand, know the blessedness of those who take no offense in Christ. For them the incarnation has become the foundation of their

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[48] Evans, *Passionate Reason,* p. 168.

[49] I am indebted to the work of Alastair McKinnon in compiling *The Kierkegaard Indices* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1970-75) for this and subsequent observations about the frequency and location of various terms in the Kierkegaardian corpus.

[50] Eduard Geismar points out that 'This possibility of offense is the burden which the divine love must bear, the suffering which is different from all human suffering, every analogy being a deception. It is a sorrow which God has reserved exclusively to himself.' *Lectures on the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1937) p. 56.

whole understanding such that a marked characteristic of the later writings is the tendency to reinterpret popular estimations of the truth. *Works of Love,* for example, published under Kierkegaard's own name, is a treatise on love as it is 'Christianly understood' and draws numerous contrasts with the wisdom of the world.

Deception and truth

The foregoing discussion, it is hoped, has given support to our earlier remark that in Kierkegaard's view faith and knowledge are not two separate tasks. Indeed they are not tasks at all, but are received as a single gift of grace in that 'Moment' of encounter which is both ontologically and epistemologically transformative. There remains however the rather obvious problem which was introduced earlier and which now threatens to undermine everything that has been said. If, as is argued, and indeed as Climacus speculates, understanding the Truth is contingent upon conversion rather than antecedent to it, then how does Climacus himself know all this? Climacus, we recall is not a Christian and yet he is represented as possessing a true understanding of what Christianity is. How can that be?

Here we must look behind the pseudonymic mask to consider Kierkegaard himself in whose *Journals* we find the following revealing passage,

> The reason why several of Plato's dialogues end without results is far more profound than I used to think. It is an expression of Socrates' maieutic art which makes the reader or the hearer himself active and so does not end in a result but a sting. It is an excellent parody of the modern method of learning by rote which says everything as quickly as possible and all at once and does not have the effect of making the reader take an active part, but makes him learn it like a parrot.[51]

Kierkegaard himself sought frequently to emulate Socrates' didactic method for while in respect of our relationship to Truth 'the god' must give the gift, in respect of the relationship between human beings the maieutic is the highest.[52] This emulation frequently took the form of irony which, though enjoyed by Kierkegaard for its own sake, was turned to the serious purpose of taking people by surprise. Thus at the conclusion of his thought project Climacus asks, 'But is what has been elaborated here thinkable?'[53] And further, 'This matter of being born — is it thinkable? Well, why not?

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51 *Journals,* 4/4266, VII[1] A 74 (1846).
52 *Fragments,* p. 24.
53 *Fragments,* p. 20.

But who is supposed to think it — one who is born or one who is not born?'[54] After further explanation Climacus concludes that it can only be the one already reborn who can understand what it is to be reborn. So the question remains, How does Climacus himself know all this? That Climacus proposed to think the whole problem through, to assess the matter by rational means, would have undoubtedly drawn the attention and won the approval of his speculative age[55] but with this last ironical sting (the question about who may properly understand rebirth) the tables are turned and doubt is raised about the power of human reason. Kierkegaard himself comments. 'To act as if Christianity were the invention of Johannes Climacus is precisely the biting satire on philosophy's impudence toward it.'[56] If Climacus is right in his assertion that we cannot think our way to the Truth, and the New Testament allusions are designed to incline readers toward that view, then his claim to be merely experimenting with an idea must be a deception. But if he is wrong, if his experiment is mistaken, then reason is at fault and is thus robbed of the power his readers supposed that it had. As if the irony were not baffling enough as soon as one begins to think about the problem the question of the reader's own critical apparatus is raised. How shall we judge the matter — by reason? Then we decide the matter before we begin. By the standard of the New Testament then? — But in this case reason must relinquish its claim to final authority. If his audience begins to feel a little uncertain about their own wisdom in the matter then Kierkegaard has them exactly where he wants them.[57]

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[54] Ibid.

[55] That such strategy was quite deliberate is indicated in *The Point of View* where Kierkegaard writes of the need to meet people on their own ground, to accept their illusions as 'good money'. 'If you can do that, if you can find exactly the place where the other is and begin there, you may perhaps have the luck to lead him to the place where you are.' p. 29.

[56] *Journals*, 5/5827, VI A 84 (1845). It is rather the case that Climacus is the invention of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard calls him 'a fantastic figure' (*Journals*, 6/6349, X^6 B 48, 1849). He is a poetic creation designed to make clear the logic of conversion but in understanding this logic without undergoing rebirth Climacus himself cannot be real. Of both Climacus and himself Anti-Climacus says, 'Actually we do not exist' but the genuine Christian 'will be able to speak of us [as] brothers.'

[57] M. Holmes Hartshorne argues convincingly that the ironical character of *Philosophical Fragments* must be taken seriously. I am much less convinced however, by Hartshorne's proposal that the irony rests in the unchristian character of the Climacean alternative. Hartshorne argues that since Christianity is *not* the result of a 'thought experiment' then Climacus cannot have thought his way through to a Christian position. But Hartshorne's explanation of the irony makes a nonsense of the imagined reader's final accusation of plagiarism through which it is suggested that the Climacean idea is not the result of speculation but rather of revelation. Exactly the same conclusion is drawn concerning the poetic venture in chapter two which again makes Hartshorne's denial of its Christian character rather unconvincing. If more evidence were needed we may recall the passage already cited: 'To act as if Christianity were the invention of Johannes Climacus is precisely the biting satire on philosophy's impudence toward it.' *Journals* 5/5827, VI A 84 (1845). See Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of his Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press 1990) chapter three. Stephen Evans, on the other hand, is one of very few commentators, Climacus' clues notwithstanding, who correctly identify the irony of the *Fragments*. Evans' discussion of the matter is found in *Passionate Reason*, pp. 16f. although on pp. 37ff. he does express caution about too hastily attributing a Christian position to Climacus.

Climacus goes on to indulge in a little conjecture about how the reader might respond. In an imaginative construction the reader brings the charge of plagiarism against Climacus. His proposal, it is said, is no more than what every child knows. 'Who then is the author?', asks Climacus. Is it you the reader in respect of whom I have been merely the midwife? That does not seem right either. Then are we to assume that God is the author of this project? Are we to conclude that the truth set out here is a truth revealed rather than a truth thought out? That seems to be the only possible conclusion but for Kierkegaard's contemporaries at least, such conclusion involves a radical change of mind.

2

'NO MYTHOLOGY...'

Having established a coherent alternative to the Socratic account of how one learns the Truth Climacus, in chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments,* shifts attention from anthropology — from considering what is true of human beings that they should require the intervention of God in order to learn the Truth, to theology — to the question of what is true of God that he should become a servant of human beings. In addition to this shift in focus there is also, very significantly, a shift in the object of Kierkegaard's polemic. Whereas in chapter one Climacus purported, ironically as it turned out, to be undertaking a project in thought, a speculative experiment, here in chapter two he continues his deliberations in the guise of a poetical venture, an exercise of the imagination. Speculation has been discredited, at least insofar as its exponents harboured pretensions to omniscience, but the possibility subtly explored in chapter two, is that if the Truth may not be enclosed by the philosopher within a speculative system perhaps it may be evoked by the poet in an essay of the imagination.

A poetical venture

Climacus begins again with Socrates who, he reminds us, was also a teacher. He was a teacher, however, who in the act of teaching 'satisfied the claims within himself just as much as he satisfied the claims other people might have on him'.[1] The self-realisation of Socrates as teacher is fulfilled in the act of taking up the pedagogical task. 'Understood in this way', Climacus contends, 'the teacher stands in a reciprocal relation, inasmuch as life and its situations are the occasion for him to become a teacher and he in turn the occasion for others to learn something.'[2] It is for this reason that Socrates refuses the recognition of honour or money for his work, both because the work is its own reward and also because such tokens are wholly incommensurable with the work itself. Climacus mocks the incongruous spectre of the contemporary clamour for recognition and reward among those who purport to teach the Truth. It is precisely such clamour which reveals that contemporary 'witnesses to the Truth' certainly do not exist in it.[3]

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[1] *Fragments,* p. 23.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Climacus here anticipates the 'attack upon Christendom' which occupied Kierkegaard in his last years. It

The reference to Climacus' contemporaries is, however, something of an aside. The real point of our attention being directed again to Socrates is to illumine the contrast between Socrates and God. For God stands in no such reciprocal relation to his circumstances. He has no need of any pupil to understand himself, nor does his resolution to be God *for us* wait upon the concurrence of favourable circumstances. 'What then', asks Climacus, 'moves him to make his appearance?'[4] Hegel's speculative answer is that the incarnation is a part of the progressive self-determination of Absolute Spirit. It is thus seen as a *necessary* movement of divine self-realisation which places God in precisely the same reciprocal relationship to his circumstances as Socrates. Whatever the benefits accruing to humankind, the incarnation is essentially conceived as the dialectical fulfilment of divine being. In respect of Hegel's theology of the incarnation Hans Küng has cautioned that 'when man thinks that he knows all the ins and outs of necessity this confidence is purchased at the expense of God's freedom.'[5] Climacus himself addresses this theme in the 'Interlude' (between chapters four and five) where his concern to safeguard the contingency of the incarnation is ultimately directed toward the recognition of the freedom of God. Hegel, on the other hand, is representative of all who offer a speculative answer to the question, '*cur Deus homo?*' thus forcing the activity of God, Procrustean-like, into the pattern of human thought.

So much for the speculative answer. Chapter two, as we have seen, is not a speculative experiment but a poetical venture. Accordingly the poet ventures an answer quite different from the philosopher. His suggestion is that God is moved by love 'for love does not have the satisfaction of need outside itself but within.'[6] Climacus takes pains to point out that God's resolution to act in love is eternal. It is not a chance decision occasioned either by the crisis of human sin or by a successful human ascent to the divine. Rather, God's resolution 'becomes *the moment* '[7] when, in accordance with his own being as love God makes a place for himself in time. 'If this is not the case', says Climacus, 'then we return to the Socratic and do not have the god or the eternal resolution or the moment.'[8]

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was not the *failure* of Kierkegaard's own generation to exist in the Truth which raised his ire so much as their refusal to recognise the incongruity of their situation. To be a sinner and to confess one's sin before God is one thing, but to be a sinner and to proclaim oneself a witness to the Truth is quite another.

[4] *Fragments,* p. 24.

[5] Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. John Stephenson (New York: Crossroad 1987) p. 286f. Küng's criticism of Hegel repeats the criticism which Aquinas, rightly or wrongly, directed toward Anselm.

[6] *Fragments,* p. 24.

[7] Ibid. p. 25.

[8] Ibid.

Just as love is God's motivation so must it be the goal, 'for it would indeed be a contradiction for the god to have a basis of movement and a goal that do not correspond to this.'[9] God acts, then, out of love for the learner and seeks a restoration of the relationship that has been disrupted by sin. According to the thought project of chapter one, human sin was characterised by misunderstanding and error. A love which seeks to overcome the gulf separating the learner from God must find a way of atoning for sin and creating a relationship of mutual understanding. 'Without perfect understanding', insists Climacus, 'the teacher is not the god.'[10]

Controversially perhaps, because it is open to misinterpretation, Climacus contends that in a relationship of love the different is made equal. But he does not mean by this, to erase the clear and non-reciprocal dependence that the learner has upon God. If the logic of chapter one remains valid then God is saviour, deliverer, reconciler and judge in relation to the learner. The equality which is sought through love can hardly alter the fundamental *inequality* represented in such relations. Nor is it meant to. What God seeks in the relationship is a love unfettered by self-consciousness or self-interest. This is a much more profound understanding of love than is demonstrated by those commentators upon Climacus' poetical venture who worry about whether love can really entail sameness.[11] Climacus' point is that genuine love for *the other* must ultimately be for the other's sake. Mutual love, if not equal in this respect, is not love at all. The love which God seeks is the love of Abraham who, in carrying his son to the altar, is prepared to give up his promised blessing in order to preserve his relationship with God.[12] It is the love of Job, who in spite of all his losses and in defiance of the pragmatic counsel of his friends is still able to fall upon the ground in worship saying, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:20-21).[13] It is the love of Paul who claims that he will gladly be accursed himself for the sake of his own people (Romans 9:3). This love, in the Climacean terminology, is a matter of inwardness. It is not distracted by external considerations which would certainly destroy it. It is in this manner, through *unconditional* commitment to the other, that equality in love is attained.

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[9] *Fragments,* p. 25.
[10] Ibid.
[11] This is one of the concerns of Robert C. Roberts, for example. See his *Faith, Reason and History* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 1986) chapter two.
[12] On which, see Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling,* eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983).
[13] Job's confession is the text for one of Kierkegaard's Edifying Discourses. See 'The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed be the Name of the Lord' in *Edifying Discourses,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990) 109-124.

Although an analogy is undoubtedly inadequate, Climacus the poet is bold to suggest one, 'in order', he says, 'to awaken the mind to an understanding of the divine.'[14] 'Suppose there was a king who loved a maiden of lowly station in life', begins Climacus, and proceeds to tell a tale which reveals the overcoming of such inequality to be no easy matter. The King's power is such that no material impediments stand in the way of his making the maiden his wife. He could easily summon her to his side and clothe her in the raiment of royalty thus overcoming in a flash the inequality of their external appearance. But would the king then have secured the maiden's love? The answer is clearly No! External considerations cannot be the basis of love's equality and may even lead the maiden to consider that her newly acquired raiment involves her in a pretence.

Might the king then secure the maiden's love by appearing before her in all his splendour? He could 'let the sun of his glory ride over her hut, shine on the spot where he appeared to her, and let her forget herself in adoring admiration.'[15] In forgetting herself, self-consciousness and self-interest would have been left behind but again there is no assurance that the goal of love would be achieved. For now there is a danger that the trappings of royalty would conceal the man beneath them. The splendid outer garment might well bring the maiden joy and even secure her devotion but the king longs that she understand his loving heart. Neither the elevation of the maiden, which creates an outward equality, nor the overwhelming magnificence of the king can secure genuine love without the risk of deception or pretence. Although the analogy is imperfect the king's sorrow recalls the sorrow of God for in seeking the love of the learner who is in error, God must recreate the learner and bestow the condition for understanding the truth. In this way the learner will owe God everything. 'But that which makes understanding so difficult is precisely this: that [the learner] becomes nothing and yet is not annihilated; that he owes [the god] everything and yet becomes boldly confident; that he understands the Truth, but the Truth makes him free; that he grasps the guilt of untruth, and then again bold confidence triumphs in the Truth.'[16] The problem is simply this: owing everything to God, how can the learner be enabled to respond with love rather than with self-conscious and self-interested obeisance?

In pursuit of a solution the poet proposes that if the unity of love cannot be accomplished by an ascent let it be attempted by a descent.

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[14] *Fragments*, p. 26.
[15] Ibid. p. 29.
[16] Ibid. p. 30f.

Let the learner be X, and this X must also include the lowliest, for if even Socrates did not keep company solely with brilliant minds, how then could the god make distinctions! In order for unity to be effected, the god must become like this one. He will appear, therefore, as the equal of the lowliest of persons. But the lowliest of all is one who must serve others — consequently, the god will appear in the form of a *servant.*[17]

God's appearance in the form of a servant is not to be understood, however, as a mere disguise such as the king might adopt in donning a plebian cloak. 'Therefore the god must suffer all things, endure all things, be tried in all things, hunger in the desert, thirst in his agonies, be forsaken in death, absolutely the equal of the lowliest of human beings — look, behold the man!'[18] Docetism is explicitly rejected by Climacus. That too would involve a deceit.[19] God *becomes* a servant, 'for this is the boundlessness of love, that in earnestness and truth and not in jest it wills to be the equal of the beloved... Thus does the god stand upon the earth, like unto the lowliest through his omnipotent love.'[20]

It is not the case that God's descent is free of risk. It can no more guarantee the reciprocation of love than the elevation of the learner or the demonstration of divine splendour.[21] But it does not risk the reciprocation of love under false pretences. For whoever learns to love God in the lowly form of a servant surely does not do so out of self-interest, nor worries about whether they themselves have not somehow been deceived. On the contrary, there is every chance that the learner will share in the sufferings of God. But there will also be joy that the deceit of persisting so long in alienation has now been left behind.

The risk involved in God's descent is the risk of vulnerability. It is the risk that men and women will take offense at him, despise his lowliness and call for his death. But it is in

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[17] Ibid. p. 31.
[18] Ibid. p. 32f.
[19] Gordon Michalson is surely wrong when he contends that, 'Within Kierkegaard's scheme, the divine presence in history is protected by something like Kant's noumenal shield; indeed Kierkegaard's position is thoroughly Kantian'. While it is true that the eye-witness to Jesus of Nazareth does not understand who Jesus is simply by virtue of what she sees, the passage we have been examining in the *Fragments* explicitly insists that Jesus' humanity belongs to the *'ding an sich'* of God. See Michalson, *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch': A Study of Theology and History* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1985) p. 17. I owe the reference to Ronald Green, 'Kierkegaard's 'Philosophical Fragments': A Kantian Commentary' IKC 7, 169-202, p. 190.
[20] *Fragments,* p. 32.
[21] Whether or not to go through with the risk of lowliness is the dilemma of Jesus' temptation by the devil as it is recounted in the gospels.

the nature of love to give all and leave itself destitute.[22] Any easier way would be a deception, a seduction which would undoubtedly win the admiration of the learners but not their hearts. It is a mark of immature love that Peter, for example, should urge the avoidance of suffering upon his master (Matthew 16:22), and of misunderstanding that the crowd should ask for a sign (Luke 11:29). To the first misunderstanding the god would answer, 'Man, what have you to do with me; go away for you are of Satan' and to the second he would say, 'To think that you could become so unfaithful to me and grieve love in this way; so you love only the omnipotent one who performs miracles, not him who humbled himself in equality with you.'[23] The risk, then, is the risk of compounding God's sorrow, of adding to the original sorrow of estrangement the pain of death and the grief that the beloved might not understand him. As Stephen Evans comments, 'the ultimate sorrow of the god is that the very course of action that represents the only possible way of satisfying the love relationship can be the very thing that separates the lovers.'[24]

Although God seeks to be united with the learner by changing himself, by taking the form of a servant, it is evident that love will also transform the beloved. It has already been suggested in chapter one that the transformation of the learner is radical indeed. Where before he or she was in error now the learner is enabled to understand the Truth. Where once there had been sin now God has become in his own person an atonement. Where once there was guilt now there is reconciliation and the gift of new life. The poet in chapter two repeats the metaphor of new birth to describe this transformation and offers two new metaphors to amplify the point: 'When an oak nut is planted in a clay pot, the pot breaks; when new wine is poured into old leather bottles, they burst. What happens then when the god plants himself in the frailty of a human being if he does not become a new person and a new vessel!'[25] The incarnation of God, it is suggested, becomes the means by which humanity in its sinfulness is transformed and thus restored to communion with God.

But is this really a novel story, a poetic construction? Is it merely a hypothetical alternative to the Socratic account of learning? At the conclusion of chapter one Climacus' interlocutor protested that the thought project was nothing but plagiarism. Climacus the speculative thinker stood accused of borrowing his themes from the Christian

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22 *Fragments*, p. 33.
23 Ibid.
24 Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 54.
25 *Fragments*, p. 34.

understanding of revelation. Again in chapter two the charge of plagiarism is brought but this time it is brought against the poet. Again, however, Climacus has no wish to defend himself against the charge. Rather he is eager to point out that if the poem he purports to have constructed is not his own, and if it cannot be attributed to any human being then 'perhaps it is not a poem at all.'[26] Perhaps it too can be understood only in dependence upon the revelation of God. Having brought the charge of plagiarism but being unwilling to admit of any human author the interlocutor is now obliged to agree with Climacus that the thought of God's appearance in the form of a servant 'did not arise in any human heart'. Ever ready to offer the alternative, Climacus suggests that the whole thing is a wonder, a miracle for whose origin we must look to God. Thus Climacus admits that it was a mistaken notion to have thought to have composed the wonder himself. 'The poem was so different from every human poem that it was no poem at all but *the wonder.*'

Towards the conclusion of the chapter, it is suggested by Climacus that the strangeness of the idea of incarnation is tantamount to a proof of its reality. He writes,

> Presumably it could occur to a human being to poetize himself in the likeness of the god or the god in the likeness of himself, but not to poetize that the god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being, for if the god gave no indication, how could it occur to a man that the blessed god could need him?'[27]

The argument is reminiscent of Descartes' first proof for the existence of God in his Third Meditation. Because Descartes cannot find within his own intellectual resources sufficient cause for the idea of God it follows (allegedly) that there must be an external cause having objective reality sufficient unto the end of producing the idea of God. Such a reality can only be God himself. Thus, thinks Descartes, it is proved that the idea of God, not being of human origin, must come from God himself.

As proofs of their respective claims it is easily shown that neither the Cartesian argument nor the Climacean one is successful. The suggestion that the ideas of God, in the Cartesian argument, or of the incarnation, in the Climacean one, cannot be of human origin are rather unconvincing, and even if granted do not imply that their cause must therefore be found in God. The Humean objections to the cosmological argument apply just as well here.[28] I suspect, however, that unlike Descartes, Climacus doesn't take the

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[26] Ibid. p. 35.
[27] Ibid. p. 36.
[28] See Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* More convincing than the claim that the idea of the incarnation cannot be of human origin is the crucially important Kierkegaardian notion that the

'proof' seriously either. Given his subsequent insistence that it is foolishness and an impertinence to attempt to prove the existence of God[29] it seems likely that the claim to have proven the presence of God in the particularity of the God-Man is another ironical ploy. The irony, I would suggest, works something like this; the poetical venture of chapter two is again open to the charge of plagiarism. And again there is a difficulty in identifying the author. The onus, therefore, is placed upon the audience who must decide for themselves whether they have merely been entertained by an imaginative fabrication or whether the 'poem' set before them is testimony to the revelation of God. That Climacus' 'proof' is so readily refuted simply accentuates what he has been pleading all along; apprehension of the servant form of God is a matter of faith and cannot be proved. If Climacus' readers who had been fond of assessing all things objectively are obliged to admit the weakness of 'proofs' then they have also to admit that one's relation with God rests not upon the resources of intellect but upon the gift of faith. Again Climacus appears successful in 'wounding from behind'.

Climacus' 'Christian' audience is likely to concede that his 'poem' does conform to the Christian revelation of God. But in conceding this they will also be obliged to face up to the implications of this revelation for authentic Christian existence and to confront the falsity of their own allegedly Christian lifestyles. For if God is indeed to be found in the form of a suffering servant, rejected and crucified by the prevailing religion and society then what is to be made of the comfortable co-existence between church and society in Christendom? Either society itself has changed and is now more or less conformed to what the servant had called the kingdom of God, or the meaning of Christian discipleship has changed and has now been accommodated to the much less demanding and much less servant-like conditions of state religion. Once again there is a choice to be made. Better well hanged or ill wed?[30]

The critique of imagination

Although a great deal of scholarly effort has been expended in articulating the challenge of Climacus' thought project to those who contend that Christian faith can be either

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particular form which the incarnation took, the form of lowliness and suffering, 'did not arise in any human heart'. But Kierkegaard does not propose that this offense to human expectation be construed as a proof.

[29] *Fragments*, p. 39f.

[30] This refers, of course, in interrogative form, to the motto of *Philosophical Fragments* , 'Better well hanged than ill wed.' The suggestion of the motto is that the prevailing conditions of human culture are such that authentic Christian existence will be ridiculed and rejected in Christendom. But if Jesus Christ is indeed the Truth then ridicule and rejection are to be preferred to an alliance with the error stricken ways of the world.

verified or falsified through the use of critical reason, relatively little has been written about the equally pertinent challenge Climacus issues to those who consider Christian faith to be a product of the creative human imagination.[31] This may be because the tradition of speculative idealism, against which Climacus' polemic was directed in the thought project, was prominent in Kierkegaard's day and the rationalist assumptions which underlaid it remained in force during the first half of the twentieth century when Kierkegaard's works began to be newly appreciated. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, when modernist and post-modernist re-draftings of Christian theology are fashionable, Kierkegaard's interest in tracing the limits of imagination is at least as important as his frequently discussed concern to point out the limits of reason.[32]

The critique of imagination is entailed by Climacus' insistence at the conclusion of his ironically named 'poetical venture' that there is a distinction to be made between revelation and poetic construction. George Pattison explains that 'Kierkegaard... empasized the *difference* between what imagination gives us, and what religion, more specifically Christianity, bestows upon and requires of us.'[33] Thus, although continuing in the role of religious poet himself, Kierkegaard found it necessary to refute the Romantic propensity to identify the highest attainments of human art and culture with the voice and presence of God.

More explicitly we may say that in respect of the God-Man there is a fundamental distinction to be made between a faith which confesses that in Jesus Christ God is truly present and poetic recollections of Jesus which assume that the confession of Jesus' divinity is an imaginative way of saying merely that he embodied the highest yearnings of the human spirit. In the first case the incarnation is held to be in some sense literally true. That is to say, there is confessed to be a genuine oneness of being between Jesus Christ and God. This is more easily articulated, of course, in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity but in Climacus' own account of the matter there can be no mistaking the ontological implications of God's appearance in time. In the second case the doctrine of the incarnation does not witness to an ontological union between Jesus Christ and the one whom he called 'Father' but is said to be a metaphorical or mythological way of speaking

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[31] Sylvia Walsh is the most prominent exception having contributed a number of articles and now a major book to the subject of Kierkegaard's engagement with the aesthetics of German Romanticism. See especially 'The Subjective Thinker as Artist' in *History of European Ideas,* 12.1 (1990) 19-29.

[32] The assessment of the inadequacy of both speculation and poetic fantasy was not confined to the pseudonymous works. One finds Kierkegaard in one of his discourses, for example, commenting that 'a poetic creative fancy, or a conception at the distance of indifferent thought, is not a true conception [of God, of life or of oneself].' 'On the Occasion of a Wedding' *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993) p. 63.

[33] George Pattison, 'Kierkegaard and Imagination' *Theology* 87 (1984) 6-12, p. 7.

about Jesus' significance for those who choose to follow him. Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity notwithstanding, he cannot be allied with those who claim that subjectivity is all there is. That some exponents of the latter view call Kierkegaard to their defence betrays a carelessness of the fact that adaptations of Christianity deriving from such a view are precisely the target of Climacus' polemic in *Philosophical Fragments*.[34] Kierkegaard himself writes that 'from the Christian point of view truth does not reside in the subject, but in a revelation which must be proclaimed.'[35] In Climacus' view, as we have seen, God's appearance in the form of a servant is no mere imaginative construction but is the miracle itself, the thought of which, 'could not arise in any human heart'. On this view, to which Kierkegaard himself assents, it is necessary that not only the philosophic but also the poetic nature be put aside in order to become a Christian.[36]

Kierkegaard's concern, articulated in this instance by Climacus, to draw attention to the limits of the poetic imagination is easily overshadowed by his frequent admission that he is himself a religious poet. There is undoubtedly, in Kierkegaard's view, a positive role for the poetic in religious communication but our reading of chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments* has also suggested that the matter is not so simple as to give the poets free reign. Sylvia Walsh is thus correct in noting that there are two sides to Kierkegaard's view of the poetic.[37] David Gouwens likewise observes that 'on the one hand, he [Kierkegaard] is consistently careful to criticize any claims that the imagination leads to God; on the other, he is convinced that a cultivated, controlled imagination is a condition for possessing an intentional relationship to God.[38] And M. Jamie Ferreira, who is concerned to give an account of the positive role of the imagination in respect of Christian faith, nevertheless acknowledges that the negative potential has also to be recognised. Kierkegaard, she says, 'was as deeply aware of the positive creative potential of imagination as he was of its dangers.'[39] It will be our task in the remainder of this

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34 See for example Don Cupitt's misuse of Kierkegaard in *The Sea of Faith* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation 1984). Cupitt contends, for example, that 'Kierkegaard demythologised Christianity into spirituality' and that he had no concern whatever with objective facts (p. 153). That would come as a surprise to Kierkegaard himself who several times makes particular mention of the objectivity of the atonement. See, for example, *Journals*, 4/4534, II A 263 (1838). Although the issue discussed is somewhat different than the one raised here, in an article entitled 'From Kierkegaard to Cupitt: Subjectivity, the body and eternal life' Heythrop Journal 31 (1990) 295-308, George Pattison similarly contests the legitimacy of Cupitt's use of Kierkegaard.

35 *Journals*, 2/1957, IX A 221 (1848). The citation suggests that Climacus' claim that 'subjectivity is truth' needs to be given rather more careful attention than is usually accorded it. We shall attempt to give due attention to the matter in chapter eight below.

36 See *Point of View*, p. 73.

37 'The Subjective Thinker as Artist', p. 19.

38 David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing 1989) p. 2f.

39 M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991) p. 1. Both Gouwens and

chapter, therefore, to consider both the positive and the negative aspects of the utilisation of poetic imagination in respect of Christian faith.[40]

Although, as Sylvia Walsh has shown,[41] there are a number of features to the critique of poetry mounted by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, it is possible to summarise these features under the single objection that poetry is content with possibility while Christianity is concerned with actuality. Although the critique of Romanticism found in *The Concept of Irony* cannot be regarded as an infallible guide to Kierkegaard's later thought the attitude to poetry expressed therein does emerge as a recurring theme in the authorship. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard writes,

> If we ask what poetry is, we may say in general that it is victory over the world; it is through a negation of the imperfect actuality that poetry opens a higher actuality, expands and transfigures the imperfect into the perfect and thereby assuages the deep pain that wants to make everything dark. To that extent poetry is a kind of reconciliation, but it is not the true reconciliation, for it does not reconcile me with the actuality in which I am living...'[42]

In anticipation of his later work, Kierkegaard goes on to suggest that 'only the religious is able to bring about the true reconciliation.'[43]

The problem with the poetic thus identified is taken up again in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* where Climacus repeatedly avers that the poetic is an escape from actuality, a flight from the pathos of existence.[44] The Romantics do not intend of course, to shun actuality but rather attempt to render actuality intelligible through articulating its order and beauty. But in Kierkegaard's view it is precisely this rendering which constitutes its detachment from actuality itself. Climacus comments,

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Ferreira are concerned to give an account of the religious significance of the imagination but neither specifically qualify the category of imagination as the medium of the poetic. Johannes Climacus, however, several times draws attention to the relationship. See, for example, *Postscript,* pp. 348, 443, 500n.

[40] The role of poetic imagination in respect of the aesthetic and ethical stages of life is also worthy of consideration but is beyond the scope of our present concern. Ferreira and Gouwens in the works cited and Louis Mackey in *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1971) have each made substantial contributions to this broader study.

[41] In the work already cited and more specifically in her subsequent article, 'Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious' *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication,* ed. George Pattison (New York: St Martin's Press 1992) 1-21.

[42] *The Concept of Irony,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989) p. 297.

[43] Ibid.

[44] See, for example, *Postscript,* pp. 444 and 388ff.

> Poetry and art have been called an anticipation of the eternal.[45] If one wants to call them that, one must nevertheless be aware that poetry and art are not essentially related to an existing person, since the contemplation of poetry and art, 'joy over the beautiful', is disinterested, and the observer is contemplatively outside himself *qua* existing person.[46]

This detachment from actuality which is the ever-present temptation of the poetic imagination is precisely the same fault with which speculative idealism is also charged. Both, in Kierkegaard's view, lead inevitably to ethical barrenness.[47] The ethical failure which Kierkegaard laments does not refer to the inevitable moral lapses of every human being but to the poetic propensity to distance oneself from reality, and thus to 'resign as an existent being'.[48] It is the avoidance of and disengagement from that which is given. 'Existing ethically is actuality', writes Climacus, 'but instead of that the age has become so predominantly an observer that not only is everyone that but observing has finally become falsified as if it were actuality.'[49] Such falsification takes both speculative and poetic form; speculation avoids actuality by offering assurances 'that what is thought is the actual, that thinking is not only able to think but also to provide actuality'[50] while poetry, on the other hand, flees actuality by attempting to look like it. It provides an aesthetic substitute for actuality and thus removes the reader from actuality itself. Howard and Edna Hong remind us that the Danish word, *digte*, to write a poem, also means to 'fabricate' or 'fictionise'. The same may be said of the English word 'poem' which carries over from its Greek root, *poiein*, the identical sense.[51] It is precisely this fabricating or fictionalising character of poetry which makes the medium of poetic imagination essentially incongruous with the historical point of departure and immersion

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[45] Howard and Edna Hong cite H. L. Martenson, P. M. Møller and J. C. F v. Schiller as representatives of such a view. *Postscript,* vol.2, p. 244 note 522.

[46] *Postscript,* p. 313n. The Kantian origin of this characterisation is readily apparent.

[47] The theme of poetic detachment from reality and its attendant ethical failure recurs a third time at the conclusion of Kierkegaard's authorship where he writes, a great deal more trenchantly than before, 'I began by giving myself out to be a poet, aiming slyly at what I thought might well be the real situation of official Christianity, that the difference between a Freethinker and official Christianity is that the Freethinker is an honest man who bluntly *teaches* that Christianity is poetry, *Dichtung,* whereas official Christianity is a forger who solemnly protests that Christianity is something quite different, and by this means conceals the fact that for its part it does actually turn Christianity into poetry, doing away with the following of Christ, so that only through the power of imagination is one related to the Pattern, whilst living for one's own part in entirely different categories, which means to be related poetically to Christianity or to transform it into poetry which is no more morally binding than poetry essentially is; and at last one casts the Pattern away entirely and lets what it is to be a man, mediocrity, count pretty nearly as the ideal.'*Attack Upon Christianity,* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968) p. 117.

[48] Paul Müller puts it this way in 'The God's Poem — the God's History' in *Kierkegaard: Poet of Existence,* ed. Birgit Bertung (Copenhagen: C. A Reitzel 1989) 83-88, p. 83.

[49] *Postscript*, p. 319.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Fragments*, p. 286, note 43.

in actuality of an authentic Christian faith. 'Poetic pathos... is essentially fantasy', suggests Climacus, 'But if one wants ethically to establish a poetic relation to actuality, this is a misunderstanding and a retrogression... With regard to the religious, the point is that this has passed through the ethical.'[52]

We have already seen the logic of this orientation to the actual developed in chapter one of the *Fragments* where Climacus proposes that the Truth is to be learned through a relation with an historical individual in time, namely, the God-Man. But as becomes evident in subsequent chapters the historical reality of the God-Man constitutes an offense to human estimations of where God should be found. The Idealist turn to 'the rational' and the Romantic interest in immediate consciousness both afford a degree of freedom from actuality which, in the sphere of Christology, yields a sanitised Christ who is shaped (poetised) according to prevailing axiological interests. In support of Climacus' assessment, Anti-Climacus contends that humanity frequently flees the offense of Christ's actuality by means of a *theologia gloriae*.[53] In place of the man of sorrows who invites us to share in his lowliness humanity posits a glorified Christ who secures our triumph. Thus we embark upon what Louis Mackey has called 'a revision of Christianity that misrepresents it as a divinely beautiful poem.'[54] Mackey continues, 'The picture of Christ in glory is theologically correct and aesthetically proper, as an expression of the believer's hope and the groaning of the creation for redemption. But it is a deceit if it puts a fairy-tale prince in place of the sign of offense as the object of faith.'[55]

All of this, Climacus insists, places the religious poet in an 'awkward position'. 'That is, such a person wants to relate himself to the religious by way of imagination, but just by doing that he ends up relating himself aesthetically to something aesthetic.'[56] Couched in the language of *Philosophical Fragments* this means that for the poetic imagination the Moment lacks decisiveness. It is again supposed that learning the Truth is contingent upon the possibilities which exist within the self. Climacus' claim that the Moment is decisive, on the other hand, accords with the Christian contention that the actuality of Jesus Christ is the decisive condition of any salvific relation to the Truth. Gouwens

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[52] *Postscript*, p. 388. The same concern is expressed by Anti-Climacus who writes, 'Christianly understood, every poet-existence... is sin, the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and the true through the imagination instead of being that — that is existentially striving to be that.' *Sickness Unto Death*, p. 77.

[53] *Practice in Christianity*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991) p. 24.

[54] *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, p. 229.

[55] Ibid.

[56] *Postscript*, p. 388.

writes,

> Christ and the atonement he offers relieve one of the burden of an independent quest for wholeness by way of the imagination; to appropriate the atonement one needs to accept the forgiveness of the Teacher and reverse one's self-understanding, seeing oneself as a sinner, without possibility, before one can regain possibility.[57]

Climacus adds the proviso that 'seeing oneself as a sinner' is itself an actuality made possible by God.

Feuerbach's account of religion

Chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments* thus adds to the critique of Idealism found in chapter one a corresponding critique of any theology which, identifying imagination rather than reason as the 'condition' of salvation, likewise interprets religion, revelation and the relation to God as a predicate of humanity. Such was the project of two otherwise quite different movements in nineteenth century theology. The first, and probably foremost, target of Kierkegaard's polemic was the left-wing Hegelian, Ludwig Feuerbach, whose reductionistic explanations of Christian faith were published in 1841 under the title *Das Wesen des Christentums.*[58] Niels Thulstrup reports that Kierkegaard purchased the second (1843) edition of Feuerbach's work and read it concurrently with the writing of *Philosophical Fragments.*[59] For Feuerbach, the whole of Christianity with all the categories of faith could be subsumed under the imagination. Christianity, and indeed all religion, was no more than a human construction, a 'poetical venture' without any foundation in actuality. 'The true sense of theology', Feuerbach famously alleged, 'is anthropology.'[60] The utterances of faith reveal only 'the mysteries of human nature'.[61] With reference to Feuerbach's programme Johannes Climacus observes,

> [If] the by-nature eternal comes into existence in time, is born, grows up, and dies, [this] is a break with all thinking. If, however, the coming into existence of the eternal in time is supposed to be an eternal coming into existence, then religiousness B [Christianity] is abolished, 'all theology is anthropology'.[62]

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57 *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, p. 236f.
58 *The Essence of Christianity,* trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper 1957).
59 Niels Thulstrup, 'Commentary' in the translation by David Swenson of *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1967) 143-260, p. 204.
60 *The Essence of Christianity*, p. xxxvii.
61 Ibid. p. xxxviii.
62 *Postscript,* p. 579.

Climacus simply repeats here the theme of *Philosophical Fragments*; it is the incarnation which radically distinguishes Christianity from all else be it the speculative idealism of Hegel, or the imaginative constructions of Feuerbach. Christian faith stands or falls with its historical point of departure, the actuality of the God-Man.

Schleiermacher's Romantic theology

The second theological development of Kierkegaard's time to which his critique of imagination may be applied is the Romantic theology exemplified in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. It had, of course, been no part of Schleiermacher's purpose to reduce Christian faith to the deliverances of the imagination but in his appeal to the 'cultured despisers' of religion he did attempt to account for the religious sensibilities of humanity by appeal to the imagination.[63] The imagination, he claimed, 'is the highest and most original element in us' and further, 'belief in God depends upon the direction of the imagination'.[64] With such a starting point Schleiermacher will always be vulnerable to the critique of Feuerbach who in essence asks, 'How do you know that your theological claims are about God rather than simply about the inclinations of your own imagination?' Schleiermacher's subsequent but not substantially different grounding of theology in feeling (Gefühl) rather than imagination does nothing to remove the force of Feuerbach's critique.

It must be recognised that Kierkegaard did approve many features of Schleiermacher's theological programme. He recorded in his *Journals,* for instance, that 'in many points [Schleiermacher's] position is right — for example he has incorporated the concept of wonder in its inwardness within the system rather than, as before, keeping it outside as a prolegomenon...'[65] Nevertheless, Schleiermacher's contention that 'the piety which forms the basis of all ecclesiastical communions is, considered purely in itself, neither a Knowing nor a Doing, but a modification of Feeling, or of immediate self-consciousness'[66] was considered by Kierkegaard to be a confusion of Christian faith with some primitive natural condition.

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63 Significantly, the term used by Schleiermacher is *Fantasie* rather than the Kantian *Einbildungskraft.*
64 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (New York: Cambridge University Press 1988) p. 138.
65 *Journals,* 4/3850, II A 199 (1837).
66 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* eds. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1989) p. 5.

> What Schleiermacher calls 'religion' and the Hegelian dogmaticians 'faith' is, after all, nothing else than the first immediacy, the prerequisite for everything — the vital fluid — in an emotional-intellectual sense the atmosphere we breathe — and which therefore cannot properly be characterized by these words.[67]

According to Kierkegaard there is a fundamental problem with Schleiermacher's Romantic presumption of a relation between the highest reach of human consciousness (the first immediacy) and the reality and presence of the divine. Is it legitimate to identify, as Schleiermacher does, the Whence of our feeling of absolute dependence with the eternal God? There is, of course, no *a priori* reason why such a relation should be denied but if Jesus Christ is to be the criterion of our understanding of God then we ought to follow the counsel of Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity* and look for whether the Romantic stumbles at the stone which the builders rejected or for whether those who urge attentiveness to the highest flowerings of human spirit recoil from the lowliness of him who has come among us as a servant. The question is simply whether the 'Christianity' of Romanticism with its 'emotional a priori'[68] relativises the authority of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Stephen Sykes' observation that Schleiermacher 'starts from a definition of the *essence of Christianity* and holds his Christology to agreement with it'[69] gives cause to ask whether it is proper to define the 'essence of Christianity' in advance of attentiveness to Christ.

The consequences of such a move are clearly evident in Schleiermacher's christology where the conditions for a relation to the divine allegedly existing within humanity provide the categories under which Christ's divinity is also to be conceived:

> *The Redeemer, then, is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him.*[70]

If Christ's divinity and redemptive activity is to be conceived after the pattern of human consciousness in the manner Schleiermacher recommends then, as David Gouwens has put it, 'the Incarnation is transformed from God's salvation of sinners into humanity's

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67 *Journals,* 2/1096, 1 A 273 (1836).
68 This description of Schleiermacher's starting point in theology is owed to G. W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1978) p. 362.
69 Stephen Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher,* (London: Lutterworth Press 1971) p. 38.
70 *The Christian Faith,* p. 385.

apotheosis into divinity'.[71] The symptoms of this modification, Kierkegaard leads us to expect, will be offense at the lowliness and suffering of Christ, on the one hand, and his transformation into a 'Socratic' teacher on the other. It is not surprising therefore, to find that Schleiermacher has no theology of the cross (except insofar as he offers a critique of traditional theories of the atonement) nor to come upon such claims as that 'the pains and sufferings [of Christ] do not mean simple misery, for they do not as such penetrate into the inmost life.'[72] Colin Gunton gives succinct expression to the problem when he observes that, 'If it is the God-consciousness which saves, humanity is saved by a kind of christological triumphalism, by successful religiousness rather than by the 'failure' of the cross.'[73]

Whether or not Schleiermacher reduces the redemptive role of Christ to that of a 'Socratic' midwife is a little more ambiguous. In the first place Schleiermacher's claim that '*The Redeemer assumes believers into the power of His God-consciousness, and this is His redemptive activity*'[74] is somewhat enigmatic. It is true that the redemption to which Schleiermacher refers is spelt out largely according to the logic of influence rather than the logic of atonement and the following passage certainly suggests a 'return to the Socratic' in Schleiermacher's soteriology;

> The original activity of the Redeemer is best conceived as a pervasive influence which is received by its object in virtue of the free movement with which he turns himself to its attraction, just as we ascribe an attractive power to everyone to whose educative intellectual influence we gladly submit ourselves.[75]

But it must be acknowledged that Schleiermacher also refers to Christ as the sole mediator of God's existence in the world and of all revelation[76] and frequently emphasises the importance of being drawn into 'vital fellowship with Christ'. Noting the ambiguity between the two strands of Schleiermacher's Christology, Robert Roberts comments,

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71 *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, p. 237.
72 *The Christian Faith*, p. 432.
73 Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983) p. 99.
74 *The Christian Faith*, p. 425.
75 Ibid. p. 427.
76 Ibid. p. 388. Schleiermacher appears at this point, to modify the theology of mediation which was proposed in *On Religion*. In the early work he appears to suggest that the mediation of divine revelation bears no essential relation to Jesus Christ. At the very least Schleiermacher's early writings on the subject leave him open to misunderstanding. On this point see Stephen Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, p. 34f.

Schleiermacher has undertaken an impossible task. He tries to combine concepts that belong to one sphere (the grammar of the Socratic teacher) with incompatible concepts from another sphere (the grammar of Christian redemption). In doing so, he has developed a religious paganism, only now a paganism with the distracting feature that it looks on the surface like Christianity. If Climacus is right, the use of Christian words like 'redemption', 'sin', and 'Christ' cannot remedy the fact that the depth-grammar of these words makes them incompatible with Schleiermacher's essentially Socratic understanding of salvation.[77]

The ambiguity of Schleiermacher's Christology is resolved against him when it is considered that the condition for 'being in relation with God'[78] is alleged to be immanent within humanity albeit as a receptive capacity. Once this has been proposed the reduction of Christ to a vanishing point becomes inevitable simply because there is no longer any essential relation between the 'condition' and the 'redeemer'. Romanticism thus holds, in common with Idealism, the attempt to find the 'condition' for humanity's relation to God, be it reason or imagination or feeling, within humanity itself and so is to be logically distinguished from the alternative suggestion of Johannes Climacus that the 'condition' is received as a gift from God. The logical distinction is expressed by Kierkegaard in an entry in his *Journals* where he comments that 'the error in Schleiermacher's dogmatics is that... he represents everything in the sphere of being' whereas 'the whole battle begins with becoming'.[79] In other words Schleiermacher is concerned to identify that feature of human being which is constitutive of a relation to the divine. For Kierkegaard, however, the condition for such a relation is faith and faith is no native possession. Rather it is something which is somehow to be attained. Thus the battle begins with becoming.

It was characteristic of Romanticism to seek the divine presence through the mediation of feeling or imagination and it was to this expectation that Climacus ironically appeals in his 'poetical venture' or 'essay of the imagination'[80] in *Philosophical Fragments.* Just as the 'thought experiment' of chapter one turned out to be an ironical ploy aimed at securing the attention of a speculative age, so the 'poetical venture' of chapter two is a deceptive device through which those with Romantic illusions about Christian faith may be encouraged to 'come a little way' with the author. It is thus a part of that larger body of aesthetic works concerning which Kierkegaard wrote,

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77 Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History,* p. 32.
78 The phrase is from *The Christian Faith,* p. 12.
79 *Journals,* 4/3852, X^2 A 416 (1850).
80 The subtitle to chapter two of the *Fragments* is translated in this way by David Swenson in the first English edition.

So then when a religious author in Christendom whose all-absorbing thought is the task of becoming a Christian would do all that he possibly can to make people take notice... he must begin as an aesthetic writer and up to a definite point he must maintain this role. But there is necessarily a limit; for the aim of it is to make people take notice. And one thing the author must not forget, namely, his purpose, the distinction between this and that, between the religious as the decisive thing and the aesthetic incognito — lest the criss cross of dialectics end in twaddle.[81]

Strictly speaking Kierkegaard maintained the role of aesthetic author throughout his pseudonymous production,[82] but the conversational paragraphs which conclude the first two chapters of the *Fragments* draw unambiguous attention to the distinction which must be made between the aesthetic incognito and the religious purpose of the thought experiment and poetical venture respectively. Thus chapter two is concluded with the assertion that 'the poem was so different from every human poem that it was no poem at all but the *wonder*.'[83] The point, we repeat, is simply that revelation is to be understood, not as the uncovering of God by humanity, but as God's gracious disclosure of himself.

The role of the religious poet

Despite Kierkegaard's critique of the poetic imagination he himself was and remained a religious poet.[84] There presumably is then, in Kierkegaard's view, some useful contribution to be made by the poet in the service of Christian faith. In the light of what has been argued above it is clear that the religious poet must help the individual to engage in actuality rather than facilitating her detachment from it. It is equally clear that the actuality with which the religious poet must be concerned is the 'wondrous' actuality of the God-Man, who, as Gouwens correctly observes, 'frustrates any attempts to grasp the divine by means of feeling, reason or imagination.'[85] We turn finally, to a closer examination of this role.

The poetic imagination, Kierkegaard insists, cannot be conceived as the 'condition' by which the Truth is learned. Learning the Truth about God and about ourselves is not a matter of human innovation but is entirely contingent upon the actuality of divine self-

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81 *Point of View,* p. 38f.
82 He is careful to remind us, however, that the regular punctuation of his aesthetic production with Discourses published under his own name reveals the religious motivation which inspired the whole of his authorship. See *Point of View,* p. 10f.
83 *Fragments,* p. 36.
84 See *Journals,* 6/6511, 6/6521, 6/6391.
85 *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination*, p. 237.

disclosure. Such self-disclosure judges the individual's 'existence in untruth' and calls into question every prior speculative or imaginative theological endeavour. Whatever role there might be for the religious poet, therefore, is contingent upon the fact that God speaks. God is the poet who fashions (*digte* /poiein) his own likeness in human form thus giving warrant to human theological speech. The divine poem cannot be conceived, however, after the pattern of human poetry which remains in the realm of possibility. Rather the divine poem makes actual that which it proclaims; the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us thus fulfilling the promise which is named Emmanuel.[86] God in human likeness is no poem at all, humanly conceived, but is the *wonder* before which we stand in thanksgiving and in awe.

To stand before the wonder in attentive awe is usually given the name of *worship.* It is a response born of the sheer dissimilarity between God in human likeness and any human poem. In the *Postscript,* Climacus puts the matter thus: 'Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference. *Worship* is the maximum for a human being's relationship with God...'[87] Worship is not, however, characterised by passivity. Rather it s distinguishing mark is passion. Thus Climacus continues, 'for an existing person, the passionate decision is precisely the maximum'.[88] Passionate decision is commitment; It is a matter of taking up a position from among the array of possibilities; it is engagement in actuality; it is the venture of faith. In contrast to the usual poetic ruse by which such passion is alleviated the religious poet is called upon to present the existential demand of Christian faith. We are in a position now to consider the means by which this may be accomplished.

In describing his own role as a poet of the religious, Kierkegaard frequently comments upon the need to make clear what Christianity is. Sylvia Walsh observes that, 'in line with his general understanding of poetry as a medium for expressing ideality Kierkegaard understands his task as a poet... to be that of bringing the religious ideals once again into view for his time.'[89] Walsh explains, however, that in contrast with his general

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[86] 'Reduplication' is the technical term which Kierkegaard uses to describe the existential expression of one's ideal possibilities. Perry Le Fevre explains that 'Reduplication is being what one says; it is the opposite of pretending, of hypocrisy, of the double standard and the double life. It is transparency.' He further notes that God is 'infinite reduplication' and 'only through God is reduplication possible for man.' *The Prayers of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1956) p. 189.

[87] *Postscript,* p. 412f.

[88] Ibid. p. 413.

[89] Walsh, 'Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious', p. 5. Walsh contends that the particular attitude expressed here is evident in the 'third phase' of Kierkegaard's authorship and is to be distinguished from his earlier positions. I myself do not see the demarcations which Walsh claims to have identified but I do not

understanding of poetry, Kierkegaard insists that the expression of religious ideals involves description rather than construction.[90] 'The religious ideals are already given or presrcribed determinants for human existence, not possibilities created by the imagination of the poet.'[91] This accords precisely with our observation above that the warrant for theological speech of any form is the self-disclosure of God. The poet speaks, therefore, out of the context of attentiveness to the incarnate actuality of God and in consequence the creativity of poetic speech is tempered by responsibility to that which is given.

This is a decisive difference indeed and it is the difference which diverts attention from possibility to actuality. 'As a Christian poet', says Walsh, 'Kierkegaard seeks to place the Christian ideals 'into the situation of actuality' (*Armed Neutrality,* p. 36), not simply to present them in the manner of an ordinary poet as abstract possibilities or pure idealities'.[92] To satisfy oneself with the poetic expression of Christianity's ideals is not to have Christianity at all.[93] Commensurate with the actuality of the God-Man the ideals must be expressed existentially at which point the inadequacy of a merely poetic expression becomes apparent. Walsh explains,

> Defined in purely ideal terms, the Christian life as Kierkegaard sees it is entirely a positive one, consisting of faith, hope, love, joy, forgiveness, consolation, new life and blessedness. But in existence these positive determinants are coupled with and made recognisable through negative factors such as the consciousness of sin, the possibility of offence, self-renunciation and suffering. In existence one does not come to have faith except through the consciousness of sin and the possibility of offence. Similarly, Christian love is expressed through self-renunciation, and joy is found in and through the strife of suffering in life.[94]

Although Walsh herself does not, at this point, express the matter Christologically[95] there can be no ground other than attentiveness to Jesus Christ upon which the existential ideal can be recognised in its distinction from the merely abstract. He it is who sets the pattern for Christian life. He it is who is the prototype inviting human beings not merely to admire him but to be his imitators. It is in respect of Christ's prototypal role that the imagination is most clearly operative[96] for the imagination conceives the ideality of

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dispute that the attitude in question certainly motivates at least a part of Kierkegaard's authorship.

[90] Ibid. p. 6.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] See *Journals,* 2/1828, X^3 A 616 (1850).

[94] Walsh, 'Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious', p. 6.

[95] The Christological focus comes later in Walsh's article.

[96] Gouwens suggests that 'the imagination reaches its most profound tasks in imitation.' *Kierkegaard's*

Christ's life as a possibility for ourselves. Imitation involves, to be sure, *feeling*, insofar as we are drawn to Christ in love, *knowing*, insofar as we apprehend the pattern of his life and *willing*, insofar as we seek to respond to the invitation to follow him, but Anti-Climacus contends that imagination is the ground of each of these capacities.

> As a rule, imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing; it is not a capacity, as are the others — if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that person reflects himself — that is, upon imagination.[97]

This then, is the reason why David Gouwens presents Kierkegaard as holding the view that 'a cultivated, controlled imagination is a condition for possessing an intentional relationship to God'.[98] I have no objection to Gouwen's argument but his choice of terminology is unfortunate for the imagination is expressly not the 'condition' of which Johannes Climacus speaks in the *Philosophical Fragments*. Like reason, imagination may, indeed must, be pressed into the service of faith but it cannot give rise to faith. It cannot be treated, as the Romantics were wont to do, as the condition for the human relation to God. Just a few pages after the citation above in which Anti-Climacus praises the imagination so highly he writes, 'At times the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility, but at last — that is, when it depends upon *faith* — then only this helps; that for God everything is possible.'[99]

Sylvia Walsh is thus quite correct when she presents Kierkegaard in the end as 'the poet who flies to grace'.[100] Christ is the Prototype but he is first the Redeemer.[101] He is the one who releases us from our bondage to error and then becomes the pattern for our new life. 'The requirement of imitation is reintroduced after grace, but as an expression of gratitude rather than as a matter of law-or-works righteousness.'[102] But when we again fall short and recognise our impotence in the face of the ideal Christ is again our

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Dialectic of the Imagination, p. 254.

[97] *Sickness Unto Death,* p. 30f.

[98] Gouwens, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination,* p. 2f.

[99] *Sickness Unto Death,* p. 39.

[100] 'Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious', pp. 18ff. The phrase comes from Kierkegaard himself. *Journals,* 2/1785, X^3 A 268 (1850).

[101] In the *Journals* Kierkegaard writes, 'When we humble ourselves then Christ is pure compassion. And in our striving to approach the prototype, the prototype itself is again our very help. It alternates; when we are striving, then he is the prototype; and when we stumble, lose courage etc., then he is the love which helps us up, and then he is the prototype again.' 1/334, X^1 A 279 (1849).

[102] Walsh, 'Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious', p. 17. The entire section headed 'Christ as Prototype' in Walsh's article is a superb presentation of Kierkegaard's view and indeed of the Gospel itself. See pp. 15ff.

Redeemer. This is the news which the religious poet finally seeks to convey in order, if possible to occasion a 'poetic awakening' in his or her readers.[103] The only possibility that really matters, Christianly understood, is the possibility which God, in the actuality of his servant form, has created for us. Under his own name Kierkegaard writes,

> The one who presents this ideal must be the very first one to humble himself under it, and even though he himself is striving within himself to approach this ideal, he must confess that he is very far from being it. He must confess that he is related only poetically to this ideal picture or *qua* poet to the *presentation* of this picture, while he (and here he differs from the ordinary conception of a poet) personally and Christianly is related to the *presented* picture, and that only as a poet presenting this picture is he out in front.[104]

The poet then, can never be the author of salvation but with the aid of grace he or she may awaken those who slumber to the challenge of the incarnate actuality of God. A note in Kierkegaard's drafts of *For Self-Examination* indicates that the task of the religious poet is 'to arouse restlessness oriented toward inward deepening'.[105] 'Inwardness' in Kierkegaardian terminology involves an absolute relation to the absolute τελος. And that means that in existence rather than merely in imagination, one must learn to entrust one's life to the hands of God.

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103 See *Journals*, 6/6337, 6/6528 and 6/6727.
104 *Armed Neutrality*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1968) p. 37.
105 *For Self-Examination* and *Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990) p. 228.

3

'NO PHILOSOPHY...'

Chapter three of *Philosophical Fragments* and the appendix which follows it are not easy reading. Stephen Evans considers chapter three to be 'the most puzzling and enigmatic' chapter of the book and suggests that 'a central problem is to determine the relation of the chapter to the book as a whole'.[1] The book as a whole may fairly be described as an *indirect* communication concerning the incarnation. But in chapter three Climacus appears to step back from this task and to offer some *direct* criticisms of natural theology. This contrast in communicative strategy intrudes rather awkwardly into the project although the content of the chapter remains pertinent to Climacus' purpose. Indeed as Evans further observes, Climacus appears to retrace his steps in chapter three and to consider from a different angle, matters that have already received treatment elsewhere.[2]

The most obvious place to begin the task of unravelling the puzzles of chapter three is with the title. Called 'The Absolute Paradox', chapter three introduces us for the first time to what will become one of Climacus' most well known themes and gives the first insight into what Climacus means by speaking of Christian faith as paradoxical. The sub-title of the chapter, 'A Metaphysical Caprice', recalls both the 'Thought Project' of chapter one and the 'Poetical Venture' of chapter two and suggests that we may have before us yet another ironical ploy aimed at exposing the pretensiousness of humanity's claim to know the Truth. This turns out to be the case but unlike chapters one and two where the pretensions of thought and imagination were only exposed at the end, in chapter three the charge against metaphysics is prosecuted at the outset thus constituting it a direct attack upon such pretensions. The object of Climacus' attack is the attempt to prove the existence of God and the problem he identifies, following Kant before him, is the illegitimacy of the alleged necessary relation between existence and the concept of God upon which the classical arguments rest. The ontological argument proceeds of course, from a concept of God and attempts to establish existence while the cosmological and teleological arguments begin with some alleged facts of existence and attempt to establish a necessary relation to the concept of God. Neither procedure, thinks Climacus, can be regarded as successful. Climacus' arguments at this point are interesting but

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[1] Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 58.
[2] Ibid.

uncontentious. The question is, what relation does the critique of the classical proofs bear to Climacus' *indirect* communication about the incarnation? The answer to this question is in fact quite simple for the incarnation is itself a confession that existence and the concept of God are brought together in a particular human being. The attack upon metaphysics is designed to show, against Hegel and his like, that such a relation cannot be conceived as a necessary one. It is thus impervious to metaphysical investigation. The metaphysician thus finds herself in collision with something which is beyond her powers of understanding and so also, and this is the paradox, with no alternative but to seek understanding through a power that is not her own. The echo of chapter one and thus the relation of chapter three to the whole will by now, we hope, be unmistakeable.

We have offered this summary of chapter three at the outset in order to make our forthcoming attention to the details of the argument somewhat more perspicuous. That purpose will be attained more easily still if, before proceeding, we make some preliminary remarks about the category of paradox. Along with the leap of faith, the paradox is one of the most well known of 'Kierkegaardian' categories, the prevalence of which in his works has led not a few commentators to allege that Kierkegaard's presentation of the Christian faith is both irrationalistic and fideistic.[3] I shall endeavour to demonstrate in this chapter that such allegations are unjustified, principally because they are grounded in the mistaken assumption that if, with Kierkegaard, we refuse to bow down before the dictates of speculative reason, then irrationalism and fideism are the only options left to us. They might have been if, with Meno rather than with Kierkegaard, we could see before us only our own resources with which to attain the Truth but as we have seen in chapter one of the *Fragments,* Climacus proposes an alternative possibility. It is certainly true that the category of paradox *is* a crucial component of Kierkegaard's efforts to make clear what Christianity is but its utilisation by Climacus in particular, is properly understood only in terms of Kierkegaard's stated ambition 'to begin where the other man is' and thus to see the matter from the point of view of unbelief. It does not denote, as is frequently supposed, the inherent absurdity of Christian faith.

Allegations of irrationalism and fideism, when brought against Kierkegaard, quite

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[3] Among the most polemical of such allegations are those of Brand Blanshard in 'Kierkegaard on Faith' *The Personalist* 59 (Winter 1968) 5-22, and Bernard Bykhovskii, *Kierkegaard* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner 1976) both of whose assessments are conspicuously conditioned by the respective authors' apparent desire to discredit Kierkegaard rather than to understand him. Both charges are also made, however, by some who otherwise applaud Kierkegaard's work. The charge of fideism is made, for example, by Regis Jolivet, *Introduction to Kierkegaard,* trans. W. H. Barber (London: Frederick Muller Ltd. 1950) p. 94, while David E. Roberts is among those who assume Kierkegaard to be guilty of irrationalism. See Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief,* p. 105f.

frequently betray the fact that the commentators concerned have failed to notice that the term paradox belongs almost entirely to the vocabulary of the pseudonymous authors and is virtually never used by Kierkegaard himself. According to Alastair McKinnon, whose work ought to have engendered far more caution in Kierkegaardian commentators than it appears to have done, there are three hundred and eighty three occurrences of 'paradox' (paradoxe) in the Kierkegaardian corpus but only three times does Kierkegaard himself use it in the acknowledged works. Furthermore, two of these acknowledged uses appear in *The Concept of Irony* and *From the Papers of One Still Living*, neither of which Kierkegaard counts as part of his project to introduce Christianity into Christendom. Similarly, Kierkegaard uses the word 'absurd' (absurde) in respect of Christianity eighty nine times in the pseudonymous works but never in the acknowledged works.[4] McKinnon comments,

> This seems puzzling but in fact has an obvious and important explanation. Very briefly, the pseudonyms are not believers; they look at Christianity from the outside and are concerned with *the process of coming to believe,* with *the transition to belief,* or in the words of Climacus, of 'becoming a Christian'. They find Christianity absurd or paradoxical primarily because they are not yet themselves Christians. By the same token Kierkegaard has no use for these terms because in some sense he writes from within Christianity.[5]

McKinnon's position receives strong support from Kierkegaard himself who wrote in his Journal that 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd — faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him.'[6] Christian faith may well appear paradoxical from 'the outside', indeed Kierkegaard thinks that it will inevitably appear so, but against the implication that faith is inherently paradoxical, such appearance may instead beg the question about whether the criteria of unbelief are not themselves at fault. Such suggestion is explored by Climacus in chapter three of the *Fragments.*[7]

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[4] Alastair McKinnon, 'Søren Kierkegaard' in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West,* p. 214. See also *The Kierkegaard Indices,* vol.3, p. 841. Prior to McKinnon's work Hayo Gerdes had noticed that the paradox in relation to Christology made no appearance in Kierkegaard's writings until the year 1843 when he began work on *Philosophical Fragments*. Gerdes attributes this change to the difficulties surrounding his relationship with Regine Olsen and suggests that Kierkegaard's own incognito with respect to Regine led him to conceive of God's relation to humanity in terms of an incognito. God's love for humanity is hidden paradoxically in the servant form of Christ. While the suggestion has some merit Gerdes appears not to notice the equally dramatic discarding of the term in the later writings and thus overlooks the fact that the paradoxical nature of Christian faith is the verdict of unbelief. See Gerdes, *Das Christusverständnis des jungen Kierkegaard* (Itzehoe: 'Die Spur' 1962) pp. 18ff.

[5] 'Søren Kierkegaard', p. 192.

[6] *Journals,* 1/10, X^6 B 79 (1850).

[7] Not surprisingly a great deal of scholarly effort has been devoted to the 'problem' of the paradox in

Before proceeding to an examination of chapter three it is necessary to mention a feature of the occurences of 'paradox' which McKinnon leaves unexplained. It is true that the category is used almost exclusively by the pseudonymous authors but one of those authors is Anti-Climacus who, as we have noted, is said to be a Christian 'to an extraordinary degree'. Anti-Climacus uses the term once in *Practice in Christianity* though not in a way which is relevant to our discussion here. More importantly, however, Climacus speaks ten times of the paradoxical nature of Christian faith in *Sickness Unto Death.* How do these occurrences accord with McKinnon's suggestion that Christianity appears paradoxical only from the vantage point of unbelief? A close study of the relevant passages in fact reveals McKinnon's judgement to be correct for in each case Anti-Climacus speaks of Christianity as paradoxical only in the context of 'speculation' (p.83, p.93 and p.117), 'pagan wisdom' (p.97), 'that which can be comprehended' (p.98), 'human understanding' (p.100) and 'rationality' (p.131). Each of these might be said to constitute a framework of interpretation or plausibility structure within which Christian faith does appear paradoxical. Kierkegaard's use of the category, however, begs the question about the authority such frameworks have.

There remains the question of why it is that from the perspective of unbelief, Christianity should appear to be paradoxical or absurd? Here we must turn to a study of the uses of 'paradox' in the works themselves. Although it has been demonstrated, again by Alastair McKinnon, that the pseudonymous authors employ the term 'paradox' in a variety of ways[8] of particular concern to us is the 'absolute paradox' which allegedly lies at the centre of Christian faith. A first reading of the Climacus literature might give the impression of a certain inconsistency in his discussion of the absolute paradox for in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he writes, 'The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.'[9] Yet in chapter three of the *Fragments* it is the downfall of the understanding

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Kierkegaard's work. H. A. Smit provides a comprehensive survey of this work up until 1965 and while there is little agreement overall there is significant support among scholars for the view that the Absolute Paradox is neither contradictory or absurd in itself but becomes paradoxical when it is related to the human individual. Emmanuel Hirsch expresses the common view when he says, '*Sub specie aeterni* it is not paradoxical' and Smit adds 'for the believer the Paradox is not senseless but the highest truth.' See H. A. Smit, *Kierkegaard's Pilgrimage of Man,* p. 110. In concurrence with this view N. H. Søe has written that 'the thought content of Christianity is not nonsense but is clear and understandable within the sphere of faith.' See 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox' in *A Kierkegaard Critique,* eds. Johnson and Thulstrup, 207-227, p. 221.

[8] See Alastair McKinnon, 'Believing the *Paradoks*: A Contradiction in Kierkegaard?' *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968) 633-636, and by the same author, 'Kierkegaard: "Paradox" and Irrationalism' in *Essays on Kierkegaard,* ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess 1969) 102-112.

[9] *Postscript,* p. 217.

which is called the absolute paradox. This apparent inconsistency is resolved, however, if, as Climacus in fact claims, the downfall of the understanding and the appearance of God in human form both belong to the single paradoxical 'moment' in which, by virtue of God's presence in time, the 'condition' of faith is given and the understanding is transformed. The differing descriptions of the absolute paradox refer then, to two aspects of a single event[10] and correspond to the distinction Climacus makes elsewhere between the 'what' and the 'how' of faith.[11]

The paradoxical 'how' of faith

We come then to the argument of chapter three itself which is concerned initially with the paradoxical downfall of the understanding. As is his custom Climacus begins again with Socrates, with the man who 'did his very best to gain knowledge of human nature and to know himself' yet who nevertheless admitted to being 'not quite clear about himself'.[12] He who 'has been eulogized for centuries as the person who certainly knew man best' apparently comes up short of understanding his very own existence. Climacus writes,

> This seems to be a paradox. But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without the passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This then is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.[13]

Socrates then, whose doctrine of anamnesis had appeared to render reason omnipotent, is now approved as a person who recognises the limitations of reason and who strives to discover that which thought cannot think. What is this thing that eludes the reach of reason? In general terms it is simply existence which in virtue of its sheer contingency frustrates the metaphysician's dependence upon relations of necessity. In the realm of pure thought there are no bounds to the metaphysician's caprice but between thought and existence, between the Socratic anthropology rehearsed in chapter one and the existence

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10 This interpretation is commensurate with Climacus' contention that 'all offense is in its essence a misunderstanding of *the moment*, since it is indeed offense at the paradox, and the paradox in turn is the moment' (*Fragments*, p. 51).

11 *Postscript*, p. 202. The twofold nature of the absolute paradox is recognised by David Law who appropriately designates the two aspects as the 'objective' and the 'subjective' paradox. See *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993) pp. 145ff.

12 *Fragments*, p. 37.

13 Ibid.

of Socrates himself, there stands a gulf which thought cannot traverse.

The ensuing part of Climacus' argument is somewhat difficult and is perhaps not as well crafted as it might be.[14] Laying Socrates' uncertainty aside for the moment Climacus agrees to grant the proposition that we know what man is. 'In this we do indeed have the criterion of truth.'[15] Having such a criterion our wisdom 'can continually become richer and more meaningful, and hence the truth also'.[16] 'But then', says Climacus, 'the understanding stands still, as did Socrates, for now the understanding's paradoxical passion that wills the collision awakens and, without really understanding itself, wills its own downfall.'[17] It is far from obvious what Climacus means here so he attempts to explain by drawing an analogy with erotic love: 'A person lives undisturbed in himself, and then awakens the paradox of self-love as love for another, for one missing.'[18] The point seems to be that while there may be a certain confidence attaching to the 'Socratic' inquirer's knowledge of herself (analagous to self-love), that confidence is disturbed or put another way, the paradox is awakened, by 'collision' with the unknown outside of herself. Thus Climacus inquires,

> ...what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides and which even disturbs man and his self-knowledge? It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man, or anything else that he knows. Therefore let us call this unknown *the god*.[19]

As Roberts and Evans both point out, it is not at all clear why this unknown should be called *the god*. This 'god' seems to have been smuggled into the argument without obvious justification. While there is certainly a lack of clarity here a clue might be taken from Climacus' earlier comments about the human being as the criterion of truth. The individual may well convince herself that she is the criterion of truth so long as she has only herself to think about and for as long as she takes her own existence as self-evident. But thought cannot remain so enclosed for very long. Very soon it will come to a standstill and begin to wonder, as did Sextus Empiricus, to whom Climacus refers, about the justification for believing 'Man' to be the criterion. Sextus Empiricus claims that if

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14 Both Stephen Evans and Robert Roberts remark upon the enigmatic and somewhat dubious stipulations that Climacus makes here and both lament the lack of clarity. See Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 60f and Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, p. 61ff.
15 *Fragments*, p. 38.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid. p. 38f.
18 Ibid. p. 39.
19 Ibid. p. 39.

this is asserted without a judgement it will not be believed yet if made with a judgement then the judgement will itself need to be judged by something else.[20] And so the question, 'What is this something else...?' As Climacus points out, it is not a human being nor anything else that we know for the same difficulty pertains also to them. Thus the suggestion that this unknown be called *the god* may not be as arbitrary as first appeared. What reason is looking for is a criterion of truth whose claim to be the criterion is incontestable. Climacus assumes that the metaphysically inclined will desire to know something about this 'unknown' but this desire is somewhat paradoxical.[21] It is paradoxical because precisely in virtue of this desire the understanding displaces *itself* as the criterion of all truth and thus wills its own downfall. The neccessity for this displacement and downfall is the root of the absurdity of all attempts to prove the existence of the unknown. For in setting out to prove the existence of the unknown, who is newly recognised as the criterion of truth, one immediately makes one's own understanding the criterion again. In the first place it is necessary to assume the veracity of one's concept of God and in the second to assume that the understanding can bridge the gulf between the concept and existence. In the light of the earlier 'collision' neither assumption can be sustained. There follows along these lines and in further dependence upon Kant,[22] a critique of the classical 'proofs' for the existence of God.

Concerning the classical proofs in general, Climacus remarks that the presumption by which metaphysicians set out to prove that God exists or, 'more felicitously', that the unknown which exists is God, yields only a finer definition of a concept. In such circumstances, he continues, 'I demonstrate nothing, least of all existence'.[23] It is clear that veneration of a 'god' who is merely the product of human conceptual activity is nothing short of idolatry. 'At the very bottom of [such] devoutness there madly lurks the capricious arbitrariness that knows it itself has produced the god.'[24] The attempt of metaphysics to provide a secure foundation for the divine-human relationship leaves reason clutching at a concept devoid of being. The 'madness' reaches its height in the contention of some contemporary theologians that the production of our own 'god', a

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[20] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism,* II, 5, 34-36, *Opera*, pp. 58-59; Loeb, I, pp. 173-75. Cited in *Fragments,* p. 288 note 10.

[21] Ronald Green, who argues that Kierkegaard is heavily dependent on Kant, points to a parallel at this point with Kant's contention that 'Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer.' *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press 1929) p. 7. Cited by Green in 'Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments:* A Kantian Commentary' in IKC 7 169-202.

[22] On which see further in Green, pp. 178-188.

[23] *Fragments,* p. 40.

[24] Ibid. p. 45.

composite of our best (or at least most fashionable) ideals and values is religion's proper function. Kierkegaard seems to have anticipated this development when he wrote in his *Journal*, 'Man thinks he will have the easiest time of all when there is no God at all — then man can play the lord. After that God becomes at most a handsome ornament, a luxury item — for there is no duty toward God.'[25] As noted already by Climacus the person involved in such deception is a 'thinker without the paradox..., a lover without passion: a mediocre fellow.'[26] Such a person is first encountered in Kierkegaard's authorship in the figure of Johannes the Seducer of whose dispassionate engagement Judge William says,

> No matter how one looks at it such an engagement is unbeautiful; it is also unbeautiful in the religious sense since it is an attempt to deceive God, to sneak into something for which it thinks it does not need his help, and entrust itself to him only when it feels that things are not going well otherwise.[27]

The same might be said of the metaphysician's caprice. Insofar as she clings to her own understanding as the criterion of truth the metaphysician remains in torment over the collision with the unknown.

> The paradoxical passion of the understanding is, then, continually colliding with this unknown.... To declare that it is the unknown because we cannot know it, and that even if we could know it we could not express it, does not satisfy the passion, although it has correctly perceived the unknown as frontier. But a frontier is expressly the passion's torment, even though it is also its incentive. And yet it can go no further, whether it risks a sortie through *via negationis* [the way of negation] or *via eminentiae* [the way of idealization].[28]

Not only can the metaphysicians not bring their arguments to a satisfactory conclusion they cannot even legitimately begin. The theological question to be faced is whether there can be any warrant for anything at all to be said about God without God having given warrant through revelation.[29] Climacus insists that reason's impotence in the face of the

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[25] *Journals*, 2/1808, X1[1] A 403 *n.d.*
[26] *Fragments*, p. 37.
[27] *Either/Or II*, p. 36.
[28] *Fragments*, p. 44.
[29] Kierkegaard here anticipates both the great problem of the twentieth century dialectical theology of Barth and Bultmann, for which he was later to become the catalyst, and also the problems of linguistic philosophy which were to be articulated by Wittgenstein. All three of these figures acknowledge their debt to Kierkegaard and in different ways each began their most significant work after having been arrested at the Kierkegaardian frontier. For Barth and Bultmann, Kierkegaard's insistence upon the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity called a halt to human theological speculation and

unknown undermines even an apophatic theology for 'reason cannot absolutely negate itself but uses itself for that purpose and consequently thinks the difference [between God and humanity] in itself, which it thinks by itself.'[30] Similarly, through the *via eminentiae* reason 'cannot absolutely transcend itself and therefore thinks as above itself only the sublimity that it thinks by itself.'[31] Here again reason meets its limit and Climacus is poised to reintroduce the only genuine alternative. If the understanding is to come to know the absolute difference between God and humanity then 'it must come to know this from the god'.[32] Such knowledge is acquired in the moment of faith in which the individual lets go of his or her absolute allegiance to the authority of reason. Climacus calls this 'letting go' a 'leap', not, as I shall later argue, to draw attention to some effort that must be made by the inquirer, but rather to emphasise the discontinuity between the effort of reason and the understanding which is given through faith.[33]

This discontinuity notwithstanding there is no warrant here for the allegations that Climacus' proposal is irrational and fideistic. Irrationalism surely involves the contravention of some principle of logic but no such contravention is involved in the proposition that something which is inaccessible to human inquiry may nevertheless be disclosed to us by God.[34] That reason reaches its limit without having demonstrated the existence of God does not mean that we have recourse only to irrationalism. The

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confronted theology with the problem of how it is possible to speak of God at all without compromising God's transcendence. The two, however, took different paths; while Barth's theology resembles the alternative proposed by Climacus, Robert Roberts has shown that Bultmann finally returns to the Socratic. See Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History,* pp. 34-37. Although having somewhat different concerns, Wittgenstein too arrived at the point of the ineffability of God although by suggesting that 'God does not reveal himself in the world' he betrays his insight in the very act of expressing it. See *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus,* eds. Pears and McGuinnes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1961) 6.4321. Unlike the Logical Positivists who mistakenly claimed him as one of their own, Wittgenstein continued to be consumed, perhaps tormented, by the paradoxical passion generated by this recognition but which could not be satisfied by the exercise of reason alone.

[30] *Fragments,* p. 45. A number of scholars have advanced the thesis that Kierkegaard ought to be regarded as an apophatic theologian but without taking sufficient cognisance of the critique of the *via negativa* which appears in chapter three of *Philosophical Fragments*. See for example, David Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* and Michael Hardin, 'Reflections on the Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard'. I do not wish to deny that there are elements of apophaticism in Kierkegaard's theology but given his cautions about the *via negativa* quoted above, Law's claim that Kierkegaard is more apophatic than the negative theologians (p. 217) seems much too strong.

[31] *Fragments,* p. 45.

[32] Ibid. p. 46.

[33] I make this claim in agreement with Ronda de Sola Chervin who writes, 'It is important to note that the imagery of the leap refers not so much to the action of the convert as to the abyss which must be crossed.' 'The Process of Conversion in the Philosophy of Religion of Søren Kierkegaard' Unpublished (Ph.D thesis, Fordham University 1967) p. 144.

[34] The quality of arguments from a number of scholars against the view that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist ought by now to be sufficient cause for laying the matter to rest. See in particular C. S. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* pp. 212ff and by the same author, *Passionate Reason,* chapter seven. See also Merold Westphal, 'Kierkegaard and the Logic of Insanity' *Religious Studies* 7 (1971) 193-211 and Alastair McKinnon, 'Kierkegaard, Paradox and Irrationalism'.

alternative is revelation which calls into question the authority human reason has claimed for itself and lays bare the existence in untruth of those who trust absolutely in their own intellectual capacity.

The allegation of fideism is similarly inappropriate when lodged against Kierkegaard or even against Climacus. Fideism describes that resolution of the will which seeks to bridge the epistemological gulf between God and humanity in defiance of reason and yet by an effort of humanity itself. Climacus proposes, however, that it is not humanity but rather God who acts to overcome humanity's ignorance as also humanity's sin.[35] The apprehension of God's act is, to be sure, a matter of faith but the possibility of faith depends, not upon the resolution of the individual but upon the resolution of God.

With respect to the debate concerning the relative authorities of revelation and reason it is clear that Climacus, and Kierkegaard too, consider that it is only through revelation that men and women can come to understand the Truth. If the Truth is to make its way into the hearts and minds of men and women the authority of reason must give up its claims to ultimacy. And so we come to the same point again — the point of paradox where understanding is offered only on the condition that *human* understanding is cast aside.

Chapter three began, we recall, with admiration for Socrates who 'admitted to being not quite clear about himself'. At the point of existence thought comes upon its own limitation for it cannot find a way to express its own relation to existence. The accidental truths of history cannot be established by means of the necessary truths of reason.[36] Paradoxically, the understanding of existence becomes possible only when one abandons the metaphysical attempt to understand from the outside and thus instead to plunge into existence itself. Embodied especially in his equanimity in the face of death even while objective uncertainty about his immortality remained, Socrates' life expressed the 'infinite passion of inwardness' which characterises such commitment and which is later to be called faith.[37] The invitation to follow the God-Man represents an analogous paradoxical opportunity to receive understanding by letting objectivity go.[38]

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35 See *Fragments*, p. 47.

36 Lessing's dictum is equally valid when stated in reverse.

37 Climacus' admiration for the passion of Socrates in this matter is expressed in the *Postscript*, p. 201ff.

38 Given that the absolute paradox reaches its height in the invitation of Jesus to follow him, Timothy Tian-Min Lin is undoubtedly correct in emphasising the existential crisis generated by the absolute paradox. See Lin, 'Is Kierkegaard's Paradox Paradoxical?' *The Journal of Religious Thought* 28 (1971) 21-26.

The paradox in historical dress

Earlier in this chapter we noted that Climacus offers two descriptions of the absolute paradox corresponding respectively to the 'how' and to the 'what' of faith. Both concern, of course, the encounter of the human with the divine in the event of revelation. In the *Fragments* Climacus' discussions of revelation have only an implicit, though nonetheless obvious, relation to Christianity. Only in conclusion does he admit that Christianity is the only historical phenomenon bearing any relation to what he has set out in the *Fragments* while in the same place he hints that he may one day write another 'section of this pamphlet' in which 'I shall call the matter by its proper name and clothe the issue in its historical costume'.[39] This extension to the 'pamphlet' subsequently appears as the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* wherein it is claimed that 'the thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo,* the absolute paradox.'[40]

There can be no doubting that for Kierkegaard the incarnation is the constitutive event of Christian faith. Eduard Geismar is surely justified in saying that 'Kierkegaard presents the Christian faith in the person of Jesus Christ as true man and true God, in full conformity with the orthodox Athanasian creed.'[41] But, equally, there can be no doubting Kierkegaard's view that one does not become a Christian merely by assenting to the doctrine. Faith is not a matter of intellectual assent but a mode of existence. Geismar again: 'The important question for Kierkegaard concerns the existential meaning of this doctrinal content, the subjective significance which it has in the life of the believer.'[42] Kierkegaard laments the propensity for non-committal objectivity which frequently characterises those whose first concern is for doctrinal orthodoxy or historical certainty. Such concerns, although not named in Matthew 6:24-34, might well fall under the rubric of 'anxieties of the heathen' which divert one from 'seeking first the kingdom of God'.[43] They are certainly to be considered as diversions from that subjective relation to the Truth which constitutes faith. This is not to say, however, that the objective ground of Christian faith is of no importance. The fact that 'in such and such a year the god

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[39] *Fragments,* p. 109.
[40] As cited above, *Postscript,* p. 217.
[41] Eduard Geismar *Lectures on the Religious Thought of Søren Kierkegaard,* p. 63. J. Heywood Thomas confirms the judgement by reporting that the identification of an Athanasian influence on Kierkegaard's theology accords with Kierkegaard's own expressed appreciation of Athanasius whom he encountered through the commentaries of Hase, Möhler and Görres. See Thomas, *Subjectivity and Paradox* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1957) p. 108.
[42] Ibid.
[43] On which Kierkegaard has much to say in *Christian Discourses* Part I, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press 1939).

appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died'[44] remains the fundamental point of orientation for faith. Kierkegaard thinks, however, and has Climacus represent the view, that there are modes of investigation into the event of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ which mistakenly attempt to circumvent the paradox and which also eradicate the invitation to place our trust in him.

Pursuing the theme of the metaphysician's collision with the paradox and with clear reference to the speculative idealism of Hegel, Climacus explains in the *Postscript* that 'the speculative point of view conceives of Christianity as a historical phenomenon; the question of its truth therefore becomes a matter or permeating it with thought in such a way that finally Christianity itself is the eternal thought.'[45] But, as Robert Herbert has ably expressed it,

> [Kierkegaard desires to] keep Christianity from being transformed from an existence communication into a metaphysical doctrine appropriate to professors; to keep God's appearance in history from being represented as a phenomenon to be so "interpenetrated" with "speculative" thought that it comes to be seen as something inevitable in world history and somehow possible in speculative thought.[46]

The Socratic epistemology is clearly evident in the speculative effort to abolish the 'moment' and to replace the scandal of the appearance of 'the god' in time with an eternal idea. Even a cursory glance, however, at the history of speculative theology reveals that the 'idea' which is supposed to be the essence of Christianity is anything but eternal and is rather the reflection of the prevailing preoccupations of the age. Thus, even in the work of Hegel himself, whose widespread influence was the primary cause of Kierkegaard's polemic, the 'eternal idea' is represented in the early writings as the ethical ideal[47] — a clear echo of Kant — and in the later writings as the essential unity of God and humanity. Contemporary liberal theology continues to hover between these two speculative expressions of Christianity, preferring the earlier view when there are injustices to be denounced and the latter view when the need arises to justify one's own ethico-theological stance. Hegel himself would no doubt have defended the change in

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[44] *Fragments,* p. 104.
[45] *Postscript,* p. 50.
[46] Robert Herbert, 'The God-Man' *Religious Studies* 6 (1970) 157-173, p. 159.
[47] The task of distilling the eternal truth of Christianity from its historical manifestation is the explicit purpose of 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion' in *Friedrich Hegel: On Christianity,* trans. T. M. Knox, (New York: Harper 1961) 67-181, a work which because of its late publication would not have been available to Kierkegaard. Hegel here attempts to uphold the ethical teaching of Jesus as the essence of the Christian religion.

emphasis in his own work by designating the Kantian representation of the essence of Christianity as a stage in the dialectical development of Absolute Spirit, a stage which was ultimately superseded in the full flowering of the Hegelian system. It is difficult, however, to recognise the system with its abandonment of ethics as a synthesis which somehow fulfils the earlier ethical requirement. Indeed this is precisely where Kierkegaard advances his sharpest critique of Hegel. Kierkegaard alleges that with the speculative approach of Hegel, men and women have forgotten what it means to exist. In other words, the speculative system has accorded the highest value to thought, to apprehension of the 'idea', while forgetting that the human requirement is to be. More specifically, speculative thought has robbed Christianity of Christ's invitation to *follow* him.[48]

In chapter two of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus draws attention to the 'courtesy' of the speculative approach in 'assuming that we are all Christians', and this without our having to have done anything. This 'objective indifference' to the individual[49] ignores the essentially subjective nature of Christian faith which is approached by way of an 'impassioned infinite interest' in one's eternal happiness. Although the primary emphasis here is Climacus' insistence that Christianity challenges the individual with ultimate questions about his or her own life, questions which are typically avoided by the speculative inquirer, it is also possible to detect in Climacus' approach an egocentric concern for one's own well-being. While Christianity, concerned as it is for the salvation of the world, certainly does bear witness to an eternal happiness, it is a mark of the difference between Climacus and the explicitly Christian authors, that Climacus' egocentric interest gives way, in the writings of Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard himself, to the theocentric interest expressed in the gratitude and joy which is worship. The Christian authors do not, however, seek to revise Climacus' insistence that Christian faith is not a matter of detached objectivity but of personal and passionate interest.[50]

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[48] While Christianity is conceived by Kierkegaard as first an atonement and then as an imitation of Christ it is the latter aspect which, in the context of speculative 'forgetfulness', requires emphasis. Hegel, of course, did not speak of atonement but of 'reconciliation'. For him there was no sin and no ontological gulf between God and humanity which required to be overcome. Reconciliation simply meant the resolution of the dialectical relation between God and humanity through which Spirit returns to itself.

[49] That Climacus here echoes one of Kierkegaard's own concerns hardly needs detailed substantiation. Almost all the *Discourses* emphasise the individual's personal responsibility before God and in *Two Ages* [ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978)] Kierkegaard clearly laments the speculative avoidance of personal responsibility.

[50] Climacus' point is echoed in Michael Polanyi's argument that the concern to be objective may often amount to the evasion of commitment in respect of one's own judgements. See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962) pp. 303ff.

Climacus admits that his insistence upon the 'infinite passion' as a precursor of faith is 'a kind of lunacy'[51] but if 'lunacy' is only to be avoided by the procrustean accommodation of Christianity to the canons of speculative reason then Climacus would prefer honest lunacy over deception. There remains the possibility, however, that Climacus is not the one who is deluded. He considers the alternative:

> What if objective indifference cannot come to know anything whatever? Like is understood only by like, and the old sentence, *quicquid cognoscitur per modum cognoscentis cognoscitur* [whatever is known is known in the mode of the knower], must indeed be amplified in such a way as there is also a mode in which the knower knows nothing whatever or that his knowing amounts to a delusion. With reference to a kind of observation in which it is of importance that the observer be in a definite state, it holds true that when he is not in that state he does not know anything whatever.[52]

Climacus here echoes the theme of chapter one of the *Fragments* where it was suggested that in order for the individual to enter into relation with the Truth a certain 'condition' was required. Just as the intimate love of a marriage is beyond the scope of phenomenological inquiry[53] so too the truth of Christianity is impenetrable to those who presume to appraise it without that infinite passion which indicates the commitment of their own being to the inquiry. Because Christianity addresses itself personally to the individual — witness the angel's paradigmatic address to the shepherds, '*to you* this day... is born a Saviour' (Luke 2:11) — it is rather comic that someone should propose to assess such truth while at the same time insisting on personal detachment. We have noted earlier that Climacus' insistence upon the subjective does not involve a renunciation of the objective. This he calls 'an imperfect and undialectical distinction'.[54] Rather 'the comic is rooted in the *misrelation* of the objective' (Italics mine),[55] and finds expression in the attempt already examined to secure certainty apart from faith. 'The way a believing person can be assured... [is] by daily acquiring the certain spirit of faith' and 'he does not build an eternal happiness on his speculative thought. Instead he handles speculative thought with suspicion lest it trick him out of the certitude of faith... into indifferent objective knowledge.'[56] Thus we again encounter the paradoxical 'how' of faith in

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51 *Postscript*, p. 17.
52 Ibid. p. 52.
53 Ibid. p. 54.
54 Ibid. p. 53.
55 Ibid. p. 55.
56 Ibid.

which certainty is attained only be letting go of those very epistemological resources upon which the modern age is wont to base its convictions.

The paradoxical 'what' of faith

We have noted earlier that for Kierkegaard the incarnation lies at the very centre of Christian faith. And yet belief in the doctrine of the incarnation does not constitute Christian faith. Faith is a matter of personal response to and trust in the God-Man who confronts us with the challenge to follow him. We have seen that such a requirement confounds those who seek an objective certainty concerning the being of the God-Man and who are unable therefore, to place their trust in him. Climacus, and certainly Kierkegaard too, consider that the New Testament pattern in which the first disciples came to recognise who Jesus was and confess him as Lord only in the act of following him, remains the only way in which the individual may come to understand the essential truth of the Christian faith. 'When the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given.'[57]

Although Kierkegaard considers that the 'how' of faith is the critical stumbling block for his speculative age, from the point of view of unbelief the content of faith also appears to be paradoxical and an offense. In relation to this content, namely the incarnation, Climacus explains that 'the basis of the paradox of Christianity is that it continually uses time and the historical in relation to the eternal.'[58] The juxtaposition of time and eternity in the person of an individual human being strains the credulity of the western mind in particular, which has long believed that time and eternity, the transcendent and the immanent, God and man are terms which describe mutually exclusive realities. Under the condition of such beliefs it becomes self-evident that the respective properties cannot be given together in the way which Christianity claims to have taken place in Jesus. To bring these terms together in the description of an existing human being is to be guilty of a basic philosophical error. It is to propose an absurdity which reason cannot accept. The question to be asked, however, is whether thought can be determinative of being in the manner implied by the predominantly idealist philosophical tradition. An alternative, suggests Climacus, is that our considerations of what is and is not possible take as their point of departure the actuality of the God-Man, apprehensible only through faith to be sure, but requiring the transformation of our thinking nevertheless.

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57 *Journals*, 4/4550, X^2 A 299 (1849).
58 [illegible] p. 95.

Climacus thus mounts a radical challenge to the presumed neutrality of human reason. In the *Postscript* we find Climacus paying ironical homage to the neutrality of the 'speculating point of view'[59] but he immediately proceeds to demonstrate that the reputation for having no presuppositions is simply an illusion. In respect of the incarnation it is clear that the identification of a contradiction in the positing together of the transcendent and the infinite, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, rests on a series of presuppositions involving the meanings of these terms. But, as Stephen Evans comments, 'If a particular proposition can be known to be formally contradictory, then it follows that a clear understanding of the concepts involved is attainable. Otherwise the contradictory relationships would not be ascertainable.'[60] We return to the critical question of whether intuitive concepts of God and humanity, transcendence and immanence, the eternal and the temporal, can qualify as concepts for which we have a 'clear understanding' or whether they rather belong to the realm of baseless presupposition? In the case of God and humanity at least, Climacus denies that any 'clear understanding' is possible. Commenting on the claim that a particular human being is also divine, Climacus asks, 'How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference and I do not know the difference inasmuch as the understanding has made it like unto that from which it differs.'[61] Here again Climacus undermines even the apophatic approach to the concept of God, for even the assertion of God's difference is conceptually bound to that which is already known.[62]

The point here is that because of the presuppositions within which reason operates 'the understanding itself has made the Incarnation a paradox'.[63] The paradox functions in Climacus' work, not as an indicator of the inherent irrationality of the incarnation but as the sign of offense which is prompted wherever human understanding resists in its own name the revelation which is given by God. Thus Eberhard Jüngel comments,

> That the eternal became in time, that the eternal God became human and suffered the history of human existence to its bitter end — that probably seems a *paradox* only to those who already think

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59 'Now, the speculating point of view has the good quality of having no presuppositions. It proceeds from nothing, assumes nothing as given, does not begin '*bittweise* [beggingly, by begging the presuppositions].' *Postscript,* p. 50.

60 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 217

61 *Fragments,* p. 45f.

62 Thus, as we have already noted in chapter one above (note 24), Climacus is careful to point out that knowledge of the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and humanity is not the product of speculation but is itself revealed by God.

63 *Journals,* 2/1340, V B 5:8 (1844).

> that they know independent of this event what is worthy to be called *God*, namely a being who is timeless, who excludes all becoming from himself, who in his divinity is absolutely not human. There is, however, only one thought which really leads beyond Socrates... a thought which is also receptive to the idea that *God* does not contradict himself when he is and exists humanly.[64]

The presuppositions of reason are not confined, however, merely to the meanings of individual terms. It is a simple matter to demonstrate that the deliberations of reason are founded upon an entire world view, a plausibility structure in which that which can and cannot happen is almost entirely predetermined. Thus, for example, the assertion that the transcendent and eternal God cannot be present in the temporal and immanent order of human existence involves the presupposition of a dualistic cosmology which radically compromises the freedom of God. Far from being the epitome of detached, neutral observation the pronouncements of the modern speculative inquirer are thoroughly conditioned by the classical Platonic dualism between the temporal and the eternal, the transcendent and the immanent, or as Plato himself puts it, between the *cosmos noetos* and the *cosmos aisthetos.* Niels Thulstrup explains that 'Plato, under the influence of Heraclitus, became convinced that everything knowable by means of sense perception is subject to change and therefore cannot be a proper object of cognition for that object must be stable. True rational cognition does not focus on the changeable world known to our senses but on the immutable world of ideas.'[65] It is precisely for this reason that the confession 'God was in Christ' was scandalous to the Greeks.[66] Might it also be the reason why the incarnation is scandalous to present day philosophy? Colin Gunton, in his book, *Yesterday and Today,* has demonstrated that 'in many ways... post-Kantian dualism and the dualistic thinking of the Greeks... are one and the same intellectual phenomenon'. Gunton traces the rejection of the doctrine of the incarnation, both ancient and modern, to the dualistic presuppositions which have plagued western thought,[67] thus confirming Kierkegaard's perceptiveness in attributing the essential confusion of the 'modern' speculative inquiry to its Greek antecedents.[68]

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[64] Eberhard Jüngel, '"You talk like a book..." Toward an Understanding of the *Philosophical Fragments* of J. Climacus, edited by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)' *Theological Essays II,* trans. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1995) 20-34, p. 34.

[65] Niels Thulstrup, *Commentary on Kierkegaard's 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript' with a New Introduction,* trans. Robert J. Widenmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984) p. 10.

[66] Benjamin Daise has shown that Kierkegaard's employment of the category of paradox may equally be applied as a critique of the Aristotelian conception of God. See Daise, 'Kierkegaard and the Absolute Paradox' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976) 63-68.

[67] Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today,* p. 87. Gunton points out that those who reject orthodox Christology in the name of modern experience or understanding, have paid insufficient attention to the classical origins of their 'modern' ideas.

[68] John W. Cook, in attempting to distinguish the views of Wittgenstein from those of Kierkegaard has alleged that Kierkegaard adopts just these presuppositions of Platonism and Hegelianism which we have

Given the dualistic framework within which western thinkers have generally attempted to interpret the reality of Jesus Christ it is not at all surprising that the two most ancient heresies were Docetism and Ebionitism, the compromise of Christ's humanity on the one hand, and his divinity on the other. All subsequent christological heresies are simply variations on this same theme. In *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus explains that,

> offense in the strictest sense... relates to the God-Man and has two forms. It is either in relation to the loftiness that one is offended, that an individual human being claims to be God, acts or speaks in a manner that manifests God... or the offense is in relation to lowliness, that the one who is God is this lowly human being, suffering as a lowly human being... In the one case the qualification 'man' is presupposed and the offense is at the qualification 'God'; in the second case, the qualification 'God' is presupposed and the offense is at the qualification 'man'.[69]

Both forms of offense, rather than being intrinsic to the incarnation itself, are products of the illegitimate prescription of what is and is not possible for God.

The Offense of Loftiness

Anti-Climacus' discussion of the twofold offense of Jesus Christ takes the form of an exposition of Biblical passages. The ultimate authority by which Kierkegaard's pseudonyms judge the confession of the God-Man to be fundamentally at odds with the wisdom of the world, is the teaching of Jesus himself. In consideration of the offense of 'loftiness' in which an individual human being speaks and acts as if he were God, Anti-Climacus cites the conversation Jesus has with the disciples of John the Baptist. (Matthew 11:6 and Luke 7:23) In answer to John's query about whether Jesus is the one who is to come or should they look for another, Jesus says, 'Go and tell John the things that you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the good news is preached to the poor, and blessed

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been discussing. If our analysis above is correct then Cook unwittingly demonstrates the hermeneutical damage done when the role of the pseudonyms is not recognised. When Climacus calls the incarnation a paradox he speaks under the condition of a deliberate ironical adoption of the prevailing world view. But Kierkegaard himself thinks that the incarnation overturns such a view. Cook's error can be found in his article 'Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein' *Religious Studies* 23 (1987) 199-219, p. 199. In the same vein it is surprising to find Bruce Kirmmse suggesting that 'the cave sequence in [Plato's] *Republic* can stand as a metaphor for SK's understanding of his entire work...' Kierkegaard's understanding of 'this world' in relation to the spirit on which Kirmmse is attempting to shed light is surely Pauline rather than Platonic. Otherwise he could not possibly approve Climacus' contention that, in respect of the individual's relation to God, the Moment is decisive. See Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark,* p. 465.

[69] *Practice in Christianity,* p. 82. Anti-Climacus also speaks of a third form of offense which 'does not relate specifically to Christ as the God-Man, but to him simply as an individual man who comes into collision with an established order.' Ibid. p. 83 Since no paradox is involved in this form of offense we need not be concerned with it here.

is he who is not *offended* at me.'[70] Anti-Climacus draws attention to the strangeness of this response. The identity of Jesus, about which John had inquired, was clearly not self-evident; it could not be discerned by mere observation. Neither the miracles nor the teaching constitute on their own a demonstration of who Jesus is. So Jesus does not say, '*Ergo,* I am the expected one' but rather, 'Blessed is he who is not offended at me'.[71] 'That is', explains Anti-Climacus, 'he himself makes it clear that in relation to him there can be no question of any demonstrating... there is no *direct* transition to becoming a Christian.' The miracles and the teaching serve only to make the individual aware; and thus to raise the question, 'Will you believe or will you be offended?'[72]

The possibility of offense here is the offense of loftiness, the offense that an individual human being, a lowly human being, acts with the character of God. The humanity of Jesus is not in question but the qualification 'God' imputed by Jesus' action is as likely to bring the charge of blasphemy[73] as it is to result in faith.[74] Such offense is found again in John 6:35f where Jesus' claim to be the bread of life draws protest from the crowd and complaint from the disciples. Jesus says to the disciples, 'Does this offend you?' (Vs.61), and then heightens the offense by asking, 'Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?' (Vs. 62). 'Thus, far from yielding or compromising, he directly makes himself totally different from what it is to be a human being, makes himself the divine — he, an individual human being.'[75] Here again no proof of Jesus' divinity is implied. Anti-Climacus simply wishes to emphasise that contemporaneity with Jesus Christ takes the form of personal address in which the necessity of a radical transformation of our understanding is impressed upon us. Will we believe or will we be offended? Anti-Climacus presents these as the only options.

The Offense of Lowliness

The second form of offense concerns the qualification 'man' when posited of God. There is no difficulty here in believing that God is present but that God proves to be the lowly, poor, suffering, and finally powerless human being; that is the offense. Again Anti-

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[70] Cited in *Practice in Christianity,* p. 94.
[71] Ibid. p. 96.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Cf Matthew 26:64-65 to which Anti-Climacus also refers.
[74] In anticipation of the protests of certain New Testament scholars and indeed of some contemporary theologians who contest the divinity of Jesus, these passages are not cited by Anti-Climacus as evidence of Jesus' divinity. Such confession remains a matter of faith concerning which, neither the 'proofs' of spirit and of power nor the citation of biblical texts can provide direct access. The point of the exposition is rather to show the offense which ensues at the merest suggestion that a lowly human being acts with the character of God.
[75] *Practice in Christianity,* p. 100.

Climacus illustrates the point through Biblical exposition. Matthew 26 records that in the face of Jesus' warnings about the suffering which is to ensue, the disciples protest their allegiance to him. When the suffering comes to pass, however, the disciples abandon and, in Peter's case, even deny him. Anti-Climacus comments:

> It is completely forgotten that if Christ had been only a man and had been regarded as only a man by Peter, Peter would not have denied him. In other words, what causes Peter to be quite beside himself, what hits him like a stroke, is that he had believed that Christ was the Father's only begotten Son. That a human being falls into the power of his enemies and then does nothing, that is human. But that the one whose almighty hand had done signs and wonders, that he now stands there powerless and paralyzed — precisely this is what brings Peter to deny him.[76]

Jesus himself, certainly had the opportunity to remove the offense. In the temptations of the wilderness at the outset of his ministry the chance was given to draw people to him by removing the lowliness and the suffering and the powerlessness. And again at Calvary the echo of the wilderness returns in the mocking cry of the bystanders who challenge Jesus to come down from the cross. But yielding to such temptation would have its price. 'By changing himself somewhat and in relationship to his beloved disciples by keeping suffering away, he has the power to remove the possibility of offense — but then he is not the object of faith, then he himself is deceived by human sympathy and deceives them.'[77]

The deception here is the deception of Docetism, the compromise of Jesus' humanity in order to confirm that he is God. Anti-Climacus suggests that this was precisely the strategy of 'speculation' in his own day. In an effort to 'comprehend' the God-Man 'speculation takes away from the God-Man the qualifications of temporality, contemporaneity, and actuality.'[78] One is left with an eternal idea, manifest in Jesus for pedagogical purposes, but in respect of which the historical particularity of Jesus is irrelevant.[79] Indifference to the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth affords, of course, the opportunity to construct a 'Christ' who, far from being an offense to the prevailing values and ideals of society, is the embodiment of all that the authors of such a philosophy approve of. Those who regard themselves as Christian ought to note that the

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[76] Ibid. p. 104.
[77] Ibid. p. 105.
[78] Ibid. p. 81.
[79] The early theological treatise of Hegel, 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion' which is referred to above is a striking example of such speculation. Kierkegaard himself, however, especially in the works of the Climacus pseudonym, gives cause for debate about whether he too might be guilty of indifference to the historical detail of Jesus' ministry. We shall consider this matter further below.

removal of the offense of the God-Man in this way is precisely the temptation of those who already regard themselves as disciples of Christ. It is the temptation of a *theologia gloriae* without the qualification of a *theologia crucis.*[80] 'The disciples who had believed in his divinity and in that respect had passed by the possibility of offense by becoming believers came to a halt at lowliness, at the possibility of offense implicit in the God-Man's suffering entirely in accord with being only a man.'[81] Whereas the disciples, in their abandonment of Jesus at his hour of death were at least honest, Christendom has the audacity, and indeed the dishonesty, to profess allegiance to Christ while abolishing his lowliness:

> Christendom has abolished Christ; yet on the other hand, it wants — to inherit him, his great name, to make use of the enormous consequences of his life. Indeed Christendom is not far from wanting to appropriate them as its own merits and to delude us into thinking that Christendom is Christ. Rather than that every generation must begin from the beginning with Christ and then set forth his life as the paradigm, Christendom has taken the liberty of construing the whole thing altogether historically, of beginning with letting him be dead — and then one can triumph![82]

Early in the nineteenth century the abolishing of Christ's lowliness found expression in Hegel's indifference to the historical particularity of Jesus but in subsequent theology Hegel's fault gave way to the opposite error, that of abolishing the loftiness of Jesus. Under the guise of discovering who Jesus really was proponents of 'the quest for the historical Jesus' denied the divinity of Christ precisely because no direct confirmation of it could be attained. Their legacy is the grievous dichotomy between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' apparent today in the continuing embarrassment over Christianity's conjunction of the eternal God with a lowly human being and in the consequent efforts to secure a more 'reasonable' Christology by recognising Jesus as teacher and prophet but not the second person of the Trinity on the one hand, or by creating a dehistoricised 'Christ' to be symbol of the prevailing interests and values on the other. Each of these approaches begin with assumptions about what it is to be human and what it is to be divine which already constitute a betrayal of Jesus Christ as he is. It is because both true humanity and true divinity are made known in Jesus, thus requiring the revision of humanity's distorted estimations of these things, that those who would cling to the old assumptions continue to find offense in him. And it is just for this reason that both Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus insist that recognition of the paradox or

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80 On which, see *Practice in Christianity,* p. 24f.
81 Ibid. p. 105.
82 Ibid. p. 107.

offense of the God-Man constitutes a criterion of the authenticity of one's understanding of him. 'The possibility of offense, which is the guardian or defensive weapon of faith, is ambiguous in such a way that all human understanding must come to a halt in one way or another, must take umbrage — in order then to be offended or to believe.'[83] Kierkegaard's pseudonymous use of the category of paradox is a provocative attempt to heighten the offense of Christianity, precisely so that an authentic Christian discipleship may eventually emerge. That Christian faith appears paradoxical becomes, for Kierkegaard, a test of whether the unbeliever has truly apprehended the essence of Christian faith and becomes also the criterion by which every accommodation of Christianity to the prevailing cultural or philosophical interests may be exposed.[84] Thus the paradox functions as an indicator that both the 'how' and the 'what' of Christianity are "specifically different" from anything else.[85]

Paradox in review

Although, as we have noted, Kierkegaard indicates in his *Journals* that 'when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd'[86] it is clear from the respective discussions of Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus that the categories of paradox and offense constitute an essential feature of Kierkegaard's understanding of the transition from unbelief to Christian faith. The reception of the gift of faith cannot be regarded as the confirmation of our best religious intuitions, nor of philosophy's best efforts to construct a model of God. On the contrary, the Christian encounter between humanity and God which takes place in the moment of contemporaneity with Jesus, constitutes a crisis for the human subject. For, as Jürgen Moltmann has put it 'faith in the crucified God is a contradiction of everything humans have ever conceived, desired and sought to be assured of when they speak of God'.[87]

For Johannes Climacus, the as-yet-unchristian inquirer, such a crisis takes the form of a paradox, an intellectual 'halt' which philosophy cannot overcome. Anti-Climacus, on the other hand, has passed through the possibility of offense and has recognised that the

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[83] Ibid. p. 105.
[84] The paradox gives rise to offense 'which, among other things, is also Christianity's mortal weapon against "speculative comprehending"'. *Practice in Christianity*, p. 102. Elsewhere Kierkegaard himself writes, 'The fact that the eternal once came into existence in time is not something which has to be tested in time not something which *men are to test* but is the paradox by which *men are to be tested...*' *On Authority and Revelation*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row 1966) p. 58.
[85] The phrase is borrowed from Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 210.
[86] *Journals*, 1/10, X^6 B 79 (1850).
[87] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press 1974) p. 37.

paradox, rather than being inherent in Christian faith, is a product of the collision between reality and the presuppositions and values of the observer. Where the reality in question is the Word of God, Anti-Climacus understands that adherence to that Word, faith in the God-Man, requires the abandonment of one's prior categories and presuppositions. In particular the appearance of God in the form of a servant renders illegitimate the speculative determination of what God can and cannot do. But if the philosophical inquirer persists with the view that human reason must be the final criterion of Truth then he or she will be offended by the confession that in the human figure of Jesus of Nazareth the eternal God is present extending an invitation to love and to follow him.

4

'NO HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE...'

From the rather difficult elucidation in chapter three of his claim that no philosophy has ever given rise to the idea of the incarnation, Climacus proceeds, in chapters four and five, with a discussion both lucid and straightforward about the incapacity of historical investigation to establish the truth of Christian faith. Against the background of Lessing's demurral at the theological traverse of the great ugly ditch separating contingent truths of history from eternal truths of reason, and in the context of various nineteenth century attempts to extricate the 'historical' from the 'theological' material of the Gospels, Climacus sets out in chapter four to consider whether the disciple who was contemporary with the God-Man possesses any advantage for faith and correspondingly, in chapter five, whether the logic of conversion must somehow be adjusted for the sake of those who are temporally remote from the historical actuality of the God-Man .

On the title page of *Philosophical Fragments* Johannes Climacus had posed three questions: 'Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?' We have seen in the thought-experiment of chapter one that Climacus offers an affirmative answer to the first of these questions. When the eternal God becomes a subject within time and takes upon himself the conditions of human finitude then, in the language of the thought-experiment, the moment in time becomes decisive. It is not simply that the presence of God in time serves as the occasion by which humanity learns of its own relation to the eternal, as Hegel would have it, thus becoming the subject of only passing historical interest. Rather the event of God's participation in history is to be regarded as the *sine qua non* of salvation, the event by which it becomes possible for the individual to enter into relation with the eternal God and so also an event which holds for the person of faith, not only, or merely, historical interest but soteriological decisiveness. Climacus affirms, therefore, along with orthodox Christianity, that the basis of humanity's encounter with God is not some vestige of the eternal to be found in humankind thus providing the resource to transcend the conditions of immanence, but the free decision of God to become immanent himself in a way which addresses but does not violate our essential humanity. The second question too is answered according to the same logic presented in response to the first. Given these

responses one might expect that an affirmative reply to the third question must follow as a matter of course. 'Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?' Apparently so! The fact of God's participation in history would seem to require the most careful and diligent historical inquiry aimed at rendering such an event accessible to honest seekers after the eternal blessedness which Christianity offers. Yet, as we shall discover, Climacus contends that just as speculative inquiry and poetical construction cannot give access to the Truth neither can historical inquiry provide any foundation upon which to build one's relation to God. Thus we have the puzzling situation in which it is claimed that a particular event in human history is decisive for faith and yet no amount of historical investigation in respect of that event will produce any advantage for the person who seeks to attain faith. It will be the task of this chapter to ascertain whether Climacus can consistently hold both claims to be true.

Discussions of the relationship between Christian faith and history in the work of Søren Kierkegaard are commonplace among commentators upon his work, especially, of course, in relation to the works pseudonymously attributed to Johannes Climacus. It is generally assumed in such discussions that Climacus, and indeed Kierkegaard himself, insist upon an antithetical relationship between faith and historical scholarship.[1] Kierkegaard offers, according to K. E. Løgstrup a 'Christentum *ohne den historischen Jesus*'[2] and Gordon Michalson speaks for many when he attributes to Kierkegaard the view that historical evidence is theologically irrelevant.[3] I propose to argue, however, that this assumption is mistaken. It is certainly true that Climacus considered that historical inquiry into the origins of Christianity *can* be harmful for faith, indeed that it often is, but he does not suggest that it *must* be. Indeed a positive estimation of the worth of historical inquiry is not only compatible with Climacus' position but is in some respects required by it.[4]

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[1] Josiah Thompson speaks for many when he observes that in Kierkegaard's later writings 'the historical Jesus fades into the background leaving the reader of these works alone with the single fact of his historicity'. *Kierkegaard* (London: Victor Gollancz 1974) p. 200.

[2] Løgstrup published an article by that title in *Orbis Litterarum* 10 (1955) 156-165.

[3] Gordon E. Michalson, 'Lessing, Kierkegaard and the "Ugly Ditch": A Reexamination' *The Journal of Religion* 59 (1979) 324-334, p. 334. Michalson repeats the charge in 'Theology, Historical Knowledge and the Contingency-Necessity Distinction' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983) 87-98, p. 97.

[4] That a more positive view is attributable to Kierkegaard has been argued by a small minority of scholars, notably, Hayo Gerdes, *Das Christusbild Sören Kierkegaards* (Düsseldorf-Cologne: Eugen Dietrichs 1960), N. H. Søe, 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox' *A Kierkegaard Critique,* eds. Johnson and Thulstrup (New York: Harper 1962) 207-227, Vernard Eller, 'Faith, Fact and Foolishness: Kierkegaard and the New Quest' *Journal of Religion* 48 (1965) 54-68 and Richard Campbell, 'Lessing's Problem and Kierkegaard's Answer' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966) 35-54.

The nature of the debate

It will be helpful to begin with to set Climacus' musings in the wider context of theological and philosophical discussion which obtained at the time of Kierkegaard's literary activity. Almost one hundred years earlier, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had set in train a theological debate which in the nineteenth century had come to a head. Lessing's catalytic contribution had been to publish the anonymous and posthumous *Fragments* of H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768) which Lessing had extracted from a manuscript entitled, *Apology for Rational Worshippers of God.* Reimarus himself was a believer in natural religion and was sceptical about orthodox Christian claims concerning revelation. In particular he objected to the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy upon which, he supposed, claims for the authority of revelation depended. Reimarus contended that the impossibility of a harmony of the Gospels undermined the credibility of the traditional appeal to revelation. He set himself instead, to dispense with the 'fantasising' of the early church and thus, he thought, to recover the basics of Jesus message which in his view concerned eschatology and the nearness of the kingdom of God. The miraculous embellishment of the gospel writers and all testimony to the divinity of Christ were to be stripped away in order to lay bare the truth of Jesus identity.[5]

It ought to be borne in mind that at the time, arguments for the truth of Christianity which rested on the historical reliability of the New Testament were highly regarded. Lessing himself had published a theological treatise entitled *The Vindication of Hieronymous Cardanus.* In this work Lessing discusses the work of Jerome Cardan, a Milanese philosopher of the Italian Renaissance who was accused of atheism. He argues, however, that Cardan was a loyal Christian and attests as evidence for his claim Cardan's espousal of the traditional historical arguments for Christianity, viz., the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the life of Jesus, the miracles that he did, and the amazing expansion of Christianity in the ancient world. Cardan also offers a fourth argument which, being more plausible, is less vulnerable to refutation in the light of historical investigation, namely, that Jesus' ethical teaching is identical with natural morality. This fourth argument was to become the cornerstone of the nineteenth century liberal theology and has, if anything, become even more prevalent today.

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[5] Although Lessing shared Reimarus' discomfort at confessing an absolute allegiance to the authority of revelation as it was represented in the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, he himself offered an alternative explanation for the differences in the gospels. The alternative was set out in Lessing's *New Hypothesis Concerning the Evangelists Regarded as Merely Human Historians,* a discussion which was instrumental in the development of source criticism. See *Lessing's Theological Writings,* trans. Henry Chadwick (London: A & C Black 1956) 65-81.

Two issues of great importance arise out of the debate which Lessing inaugurated. The first is the question of how far arguments which are contingent upon historical testimony can provide the basis for a claim to theological truth. Doubt about the authenticity of such arguments in theology runs closely parallel to Cartesian scepticism about whether events of the material world could provide any foundation for knowledge. Certainty in respect of the truth must rather be based upon the sure foundation of human reason. We have already encountered the soteriological consequences of such claims in chapter one of Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments.*

The second important issue arising from Cardan's arguments concerns the relationship between revelation and reason. The arguments Cardan puts forward concerning miracles and the fulfilment of prophecy represent the claim that Christianity rests on a revelation of God which supersedes reason. While it might be regarded as reasonable to accept the superior authority of revelation, if indeed revelation comes from God, it was by no means easy to determine the authenticity of competing claims to direct revelatory experience, particularly when such claims concerned the contingent sphere of human history. It is not surprising, given this climate of uncertainty about the truths of history, that the Bible's reliance upon accounts of historical events to convey the ultimate truth of God was viewed with increasing scepticism. Lessing himself was concerned with the extent to which it is possible to receive from the material of the Bible a foundation sufficient for the absolute commitment of one's entire life. It is a question which has been expressed many times since and remains a forceful question in our modern world. Helmut Thielicke puts it thus:

> If I as a rational being am conversant with the maximal degree of certainty, i.e. that of logical judgments, can I be content with the dubious certainty of a purely historical account? Can I base my existence on the records of the supposed resurrection of a Son of God which are not subject to any final control? [6]

To Lessing and to increasing numbers of his generation the dependence of Christian faith upon dubitable historical testimony appeared to violate one's essence as a rational being. It ought to be said that Lessing himself did not embrace the newly emergent scepticism with any great enthusiasm. He remained torn between the orthodox Lutheran piety of his upbringing, to which he was a grateful heir, and the troubling consequences of his

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[6] Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought,* trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990) p. 114.

intellectual honesty. It was this honest struggle which was later to win the respect of Søren Kierkegaard and, in Kierkegaard's mind, to set him apart from those philosophers whose views he otherwise shared.

The negative estimation of history which Lessing introduced into the theological thinking of his day has its roots in Platonism but had recently re-emerged in the philosophy of Leibniz (1646-1716) and Spinoza (1632-1677), both of whose writings were to be found among Lessing's favourite philosophical texts. According to Leibniz's theory of knowledge there are two kinds of truth, the necessary truths of reason and the contingent truths of history. 'The original proof of necessary truths', according to Leibniz, 'comes from the understanding alone, and all other truths come from experiences or from observations of the senses.'[7] Truths of reason were said to belong to a higher order and valuation than mere truths of fact. Leibniz's explanation of this difference was that 'truths of reason are necessary and their opposite is impossible; those of fact are contingent and their opposite is possible.'[8]

Spinoza likewise argues that the natural divine law,

> does not demand belief in historical narratives of any kind whatsoever. For since it is merely a consideration of human nature that leads us to this natural Divine Law, evidently it applies equally to Adam as to any other man... Nor can belief in historical narratives, however certain, give us knowledge of God, nor, consequently, of the love of God. For the love of God arises from the knowledge of God, a knowledge deriving from general axioms that are certain and self-evident, and so belief in historical narratives is by no means essential to the attainment of our supreme good.[9]

This negative view of history and the resultant undermining of the traditional basis for Christian faith was taken up by Lessing in his tract, 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power'.[10] The title refers to the two main props of traditional apologetic; prophecy and miracle (cf 1 Cor 2: 1-5). Motivated by the desire to find a secure foundation for faith rather than to discredit it, Lessing exposes the unreliability of the traditional historical arguments. He argues that historical truths cannot give rise to certainty for any of three reasons.

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7 *New Essays on the Human Understanding,* I, i, 5, trans. Alfred Gideon Langley (Chicago & London: Open Court 1916) p. 81.
8 *Monadology,* 33, trans. Robert Latta (London: Oxford University Press) p. 236.
9 *Tractatus theologico-politicus.* iv, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill) p. 106f.
10 *Lessing's Theological Writings,* 51-56.

a) Historical certainty is limited because the truth claims do not arise out of my own rational essence but are imported as the judgements and testimonies of others.
b) As distinct from mathematical propositions or rational truths, historical certainty means approximation and can have at best, only the rank of probability.[11]
c) If something is to be historically verifiable and therefore certain to me, it must satisfy the criteria of analogy, (i.e there must be the possibility of its occurrence elsewhere), causality (we cannot conceive of any event without a cause) and immanence (i.e we must be able to recognise it as belonging to the objectifiable realm of occurrence).

According to Lessing, testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is clearly central to Christianity does not fare well by any of these criteria. At the more general level however, Lessing argues that if all historical truths are uncertain then they cannot prove anything. If our premises are not indubitable our argument cannot have the status of a proof. His position is articulated in the famous proposition that 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.'[12] There exists a broad ugly ditch between the two types of truth, says Lessing, which 'it is impossible to get across however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.'[13]

Following Lessing and the work of Reimarus which he had popularised, there arose in the nineteenth century a concerted attempt to disentangle the alleged facts of history from the New Testament writers' 'mythological' interpretations of Jesus. This 'quest for the historical Jesus', as it subsequently became known, had reached a high point in 1835 with the publication of D. F. Strauss' celebrated *Life of Jesus*. It was assumed by Strauss and by other proponents of the quest that if we could only get back to the historical facts of Jesus' life we would purge theology of all doubtful material and be left with the true basis for faith. Such basis, it was assumed, would be commensurate with the truths of reason which could be established on other grounds. In this way the certainty deemed necessary before the commitment of 'faith' could be made derives not from history but from reason. The historical serves, as Kant had put it, only for illustration, not for demonstration.

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[11] It has recently been argued by Peter Carnley that the western philosophical tradition has too easily accepted the allegation that historical knowledge can only be approximate. Carnley contends that at least some historical truths can be established conclusively. While one may be inclined to accept Carnley's view it remains the case that the transcendent reference which is integral to the Gospel writers' understanding of history remains opaque to historical inquiry. See Peter Carnley, 'The Poverty of Historical Scepticism' *Christ, Faith and History,* eds. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1972) 165-189.
[12] Lessing, 'On the Proof of Spirit and of Power' p. 53.
[13] Ibid. p. 55.

Clearly there are questions arising from this approach to Christology of both an historical and a theological nature. Historically we may ask whether it is in fact possible to reconstruct the historical life of Jesus in the way that the nineteenth century exponents of the quest thought possible. What is the nature of the evidence we have at our disposal and what is the status of the conclusions we might arrive at on the basis of this evidence? Recent Biblical scholarship has undermined the use that was made of the biblical material by exponents of the quest. Theologically we may ask whether reason can legitimately be employed as the arbiter of all our claims about the person of Jesus. Such an assumption is subject to considerable doubt, especially in the light of Heinz Zahrnt's observation that the re-construction of the 'historical Jesus' after the removal of the Christological dogma of the early church was governed by the presuppositions of the writers themselves. 'This was typically the neo-humanist myth of the nineteenth century. Behind this myth stood a decided view of history, a view which was a hazy, idealistic historical pantheism.'[14] Zahrnt concludes that it is impossible to reconstruct in any way the events of Jesus' life without absolutising a particular dogma or unifying principle.

The obvious shortcomings of this approach notwithstanding, the advocates of the quest were undoubtedly correct in their assertion that history is the place of our encounter with God. That claim is central to the Christian faith with its confession that God has become incarnate in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Within the context of such faith the question to be asked is whether God ceases to be God in order to become human. That could surely be the only justification for attempting to account for the person of Christ within categories of immanence.

The contemporary disciple

Kierkegaard's approach to the problems that have been outlined is characteristically imaginative. Through the agency of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard considers, in chapter four of *Philosophical Fragments,* whether a disciple who was the historical contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth has any advantage in respect of faith. As eye witness such a contemporary will reasonably be considered to have access to a great deal of historical evidence concerning the life of Jesus and, correspondingly, a high degree of certainty concerning those events which are said to be decisive for faith. According to Lessing's estimation of the matter such a contemporary would indeed possess a decisive advantage for the insurmountable barrier of historical distance would be entirely removed. Lessing comments,

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14 Heinz Zahrnt, *The Historical Jesus* (London: Collins 1963) p. 48.

If I had lived at the time of Christ, then of course the prophecies fulfilled in his person would have made me pay great attention to him. If I had actually seen him do miracles; if I had no cause to doubt that these were true miracles; then in a worker of miracles who had been marked out so long before, I would have gained so much confidence that I would willingly have submitted my intellect to his, and I would have believed him in all things in which indisputable experiences did not tell against him.[15]

Climacus, however, is not so sure. 'The god', to continue with the 'experiment' of chapters one and two, 'has made his appearance as a teacher. He has taken the form of a servant.' This self limitation of God introduces an uncertainty, an ambiguity, a paradox into the reality of his presence which precludes his immediately being recognised by those around him.

> ...the servant form is not something put on but is actual, not a parastatic but an actual body, and the god, from the hour when by the omnipotent resolution of his omnipotent love he became a servant, he has himself become captive, so to speak, in his resolution and is now obliged to continue (to go on talking loosely) whether he wants to or not. He cannot betray his identity; unlike that noble king, he does not have the possibility of suddenly disclosing that he is, after all, the king...[16]

Such possibility is precluded simply because God's lowliness is itself the teaching. God's becoming human, paradoxical as that may sound, is precisely the means by which the absolute qualitative difference between God and humanity is overcome. The idea which Climacus seeks to safeguard received classical expression in the words of Irenaeus: 'Because of His measureless love He became what we are in order to enable us to become what He is.'[17] The 'becoming what we are' conceals from the immediate perception of the contemporary that it is indeed God who has thus come among us. In his divergence from Lessing, Climacus appears to have classical Christology on his side. Climacus' view is also supported by the rather obvious fact that in general Jesus was not overwhelmed by his contemporaries seeking to confess him as Lord and God. 'He is the carpenter's son from Nazareth' was a typically more tentative and often dismissive reaction. The point Climacus makes here is quite simple; even for the contemporary witness the revelation of God in Christ does not become self-evident. The apprehension

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15 Lessing, 'On the Proof of Spirit and of Power' *Theological Writings,* p. 51f.
16 *Fragments,* p. 55.
17 *Haer.* 5, praef. Cited in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* Fifth Edition (London: A & C Black) 1960 p. 172.

of revelation remains a matter of faith and is as such, fundamentally incommensurable with the detached and impersonal character of objective historical research. The necessity of personal engagement with God and the decision either to accept or take offense at his presence in Jesus Christ lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's quest for a genuine Christianity. Such engagement and choice is precisely what the objective historical inquiry into the person of Jesus manages to avoid for it places an onus in respect of his identity, not on the individual, but upon the competency of historical scholarship and marks a retreat from the existential demand of the question which Jesus himself asks; 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:15). Avoidance of such questions will not preclude whole generations from admiring Christ, from being impressed by his commitment to his cause, by the wisdom of his teaching or by his compassionate dealings with others but, according to Kierkegaard, it will not produce Christians. The difficulty with historical scholarship is that although it may encourage admiration of Jesus, by its very nature it will leave unanswered the invitation to take up one's cross and follow him (Luke 14:27).

The second reason for Climacus' apparent indifference to the products of historical scholarship is that from the vantage point of unbelief the object of faith is the absolute paradox. The wisdom of the world considers it implausible, even absurd, that the eternal and transcendent God should condescend to take the form of a servant and become a subject within the temporal and immanent realm of human history. But that God has done this is precisely what Christian faith confesses. Historical scholarship may very well investigate the historical life of the man so confessed to be divine but whether or not he is divine is beyond the scope of historical inquiry. The coincidence in the God-Man of the eternal and the temporal, the transcendent and the immanent is precisely the reason why the object of faith remains inaccessible to historical scholarship which, quite properly, undertakes its investigations within categories of immanence. Climacus insists, therefore that an eternal happiness cannot be built on historical knowledge.[18] That proponents of the nineteenth century 'quest for the historical Jesus' thought that their investigations could uncover the transcendent significance of Jesus and similarly that some contemporary theologians should argue that the incarnation must be denied on historical

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[18] There has been some variance of opinion in recent literature about whether Climacus does indeed offer a negative answer to the third of the questions which appear on the title page of *Philosophical Fragments:* 'Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?' In opposition to the majority of scholars Louis Pojman thinks that Climacus gives an affirmative answer to the question. See Louis P. Pojman, 'Kierkegaard on Faith and History' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982) 57-68. Pojman's position is rather unconvincing, however, especially in the light of his recognition in the same article that in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus mounts a sustained attack on the notion that historical inquiry might provide the basis for faith.

grounds, represents neither the failure of historical method nor the falsification of Christian faith but rather a simple category mistake on the part of those who make such claims. Climacus himself writes,

> ...it is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact — indeed, knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness — by no means makes the eyewitness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical.[19]

And further,

> It is easy to see then... that faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is a purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is historical.[20]

In Western thought at least, historical scholarship is generally pursued under the presupposition that Leibniz's distinction between the necessary truths of reason and the accidental truths of history is self evident. Under such conditions historical inquiry can have no jurisdiction in the sphere of the eternal. Any collapsing of the distinction, on the other hand, undermines the infinite qualitative difference between God and the world and falsifies human experience of the contingency of history. Recalling the words of Isaiah, Jesus reminded the disciples that there would be those 'who will indeed listen, but never understand' and there will be those who 'will indeed look, but never perceive' (Matthew 13:14). With the same point in view Climacus advises that the relative temporal proximity of the 'observer' to the events in question makes no difference to her capacity to 'see' and to 'understand'.

The disciple at second hand[21]

Climacus' consideration of the situation of the disciple at second hand is preceded by an 'Interlude' which in the schema of *Philosophical Fragments* is said to correspond to the intervention of time, eighteen hundred and forty three years at time of writing, which separates later disciples from those disciples who were historically contemporary with the

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19 *Fragments*, p. 59.
20 Ibid. p. 62.
21 Along with Stephen Evans I see no advantage in translating the Danish *Discipel* as 'follower' as the Hongs do here and elsewhere in the *Fragments*. I share Evans' preference for 'disciple' as outlined by him in *Passionate Reason*, p. 96 note 3.

appearance of God. The interlude affords Climacus the opportunity to counter the Hegelian misconception that the incarnation represents the unfolding of an eternal and necessary idea in time. At the time of Kierkegaard's authorship, of course, Hegel's speculative view of history was beginning to reappear in the historical positivism of Karl Marx.[22] Climacus challenges the suggestion that any historical event be regarded as necessary by reminding his readers that past events do not become necessary just by virtue of their being unchangeable. Although Climacus does not address the matter explicitly, his insistence upon the contingency of history, even the particular history of the God-Man , safeguards the freedom and sovereignty of the God whose participation in history is always a matter of grace. The worldly non-necessity of God, as Eberhard Jüngel has put it, stands in precise agreement with the statement that God is love.[23]

The metaphysical discussion of the interlude soon gives way to Climacus' more customary poetic style, when in chapter five he returns to the question of the non-contemporary disciple or the disciple at second hand. Climacus acknowledges that it might be a mistake to consider the situation of all non-contemporaries as identical and so, for the sake of argument, he considers whether the admitted differences between second generation disciples and those of the latest generation might constitute a decisive advantage for faith. It is undoubtedly the case, says Climacus, that the second generation disciple who still has the opportunity to consult eyewitnesses, is in a much better position to accumulate historical knowledge about the appearance of the god in time. We are urged to be clear, however, that the maximal degree of reliability in respect of such knowledge does not constitute a basis for faith. The reason is, as Climacus has already given in chapter four, that the appearance of God in time is no mere historical fact. More precisely, 'divinity is not an immediate qualification'. It is not, in other words, a qualification which is open to view. Perhaps the truth of Climacus' assertion here might be demonstrated by the impossibility of giving an *a priori* answer to the question, 'How shall God behave when he appears in time?' The difficulty which confronts those who seek an evidential basis for Christian faith is the determination of what might constitute evidence for the incarnation.[24] What are we to look for? The question is, of course, in a

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22 On Kierkegaard's relation to Marx, see Gregor Malantschuk, *The Controversial Kierkegaard,* trans. Howard V. Hong (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press 1980) p. 11 and chapter 5.

23 Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World,* trans. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1983) p. 21f.

24 Richard Swinburne in *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992) is among those who have attempted such a task but it is difficult to escape the impression that Swinburne's allegedly *a priori* criteria of authentic divine self-disclosure are parasitic upon the Christian account of the incarnation. Swinburne's criteria include, for example, the probability that the revelation will be accompanied by miraculous acts, that it will be unique, occurring only once in history, that it will include an atonement of some sort, that the revelation will occur within the context of a particular culture

slightly different form, that of John the Baptist who sent messengers to Jesus asking whether he is the one who is to come or should they look for another (Matthew 11:3). As rehearsed in chapter three above, despite his pointing to the blind who have received their sight, the lame who walk and so on, Jesus' reply is enigmatic; 'Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.' The works which Jesus has referred to do not, apparently, constitute evidence of his divine identity. Rather they constitute the occasion in which John himself is called into question. They beg the question rather than answer it and leave John with the choice to believe or otherwise to be offended.

If there is any advantage in the close temporal proximity of second generation disciples to the appearance of God in time it is simply the 'relative advantage of being closer to the jolt of the fact.'[25] Temporal proximity to the God-Man simply manifests the necessity for decision ever more clearly and affords less opportunity to avoid the challenge of belief. But this is not an advantage which has any bearing on the individual decision to believe or to take offense at the God-Man. In this latter regard the latest generation of disciples find themselves in just the same position as those who went before. In the language of Climacus' thought-experiment, the second generation of disciples, although likely to be more readily impressed by the need for a decision in respect of the God-Man, have forfeited the Truth through sin and remain in need of a reconciler, a deliverer and a saviour who can impart to them the condition and along with it the Truth.

If the apparent advantage of the second generation of disciples was the relative currency of testimony concerning the God-Man, the advantage which might be thought to accrue to the latest generation of disciples is the accumulated tradition which now undergirds the claims of faith. The spectacular spread of Christianity and the establishment of Christendom has surely contributed to the authentication of such claims thereby giving the latest generation a decisive advantage. We have encountered this argument already in

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and employ the historical and scientific presuppositions of that culture and finally that the revelation will not be too evident, thus requiring faith and commitment from those who respond to the revelation. He even suggests that there are good *a priori* grounds for anticipating that a revelation should take the form of incarnation. A critical point of Swinburne's argument is that the *a priori* plausibility, even probability of these characteristics of genuine revelation means that claims that such a revelation has taken place 'require a lot less in the way of historical evidence than they would do otherwise' (p. 69). Climacus, on the other hand, contends that the Christian revelation is distinguished precisely by its discontinuity with prior expectations. It is thus regarded as implausible, paradoxical and absurd. The difference of opinion here cannot be settled speculatively unless we presuppose the correctness of Swinburne's view, viz., the characteristics of genuine revelation can be anticipated by human reason. On this matter at least, revelation must be allowed to speak for itself. A discussion of Swinburne's project with brief reference to Kierkegaard's suspicion of evidentialist epistemologies can be found in Evans, 'Evidentialist and non-evidentialist accounts of historical religious knowledge.' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35 (1994) 153-182.

[25] *Fragments,* p. 93.

the thought of Jerome Cardan to whom Lessing drew attention, but it is proffered by Climacus with considerable irony. For the contemporary generation whom Climacus addresses, have reached the point where participation in Christendom has become a substitute for faith. The weight of tradition is now so strong that no decision is any longer required. Christian faith, it is supposed, is simply a matter of living in a society which claims to be Christian. Every individual becomes a Christian at birth thus making redundant Jesus' promise of a new birth (John 3:1-16). But is this an advantage? Climacus, as we surely now expect, thinks not. Far from being an advantage, the assumption that one is a Christian by virtue of belonging to Christendom is sheer nonsense. That someone should be born with faith is truly the '*non plus ultra* in lunacy'.[26]

It is equally absurd to suggest that the appearance of the eternal God in the person of a historical figure can be naturalised. It is rather the case that the revelation of God disturbs the natural order, calls into question the sinful organisation of human life and requires transformation and repentance from those to whom the revelation is addressed. Similarly, revelation resists incorporation into the existing scheme of things and does not seek support form human authorities. The fact of the revelation

> has no respect for domestication, is too proud to desire a follower who joins in the strength of the successful outcome of the matter, refuses to be naturalized under the protection of a king or a professor — it is and remains the paradox and does not permit attainment by speculation. That fact is only for faith. [27]

Climacus acknowledges that to speak of the incarnation as a 'fact' is 'an accommodation to a less correct use of language' but he continues to speak this way in order to make clear that although the incarnation is not an event which can be accommodated within the confines of historical knowledge, neither can it be dehistoricised. Testimony to the incarnation does not require to be demythologised so that the ahistorical and divinely sanctioned principle of authentic personhood can be distilled.[28]

To prevent confusion however, and in faithfulness to the nature of the event of the

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[26] Ibid. p. 96.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Robert C. Roberts, in a discussion of Climacus' insistence upon the decisiveness of 'the Moment', has shown that, despite intentions to the contrary, the diverse theological projects of Schleiermacher, Bultmann and Cobb all render the historical particularity of Jesus Christ incidental to salvation. See Roberts *Faith, Reason and History,* p. 30ff.

incarnation itself, Climacus designates the fact of the incarnation an eternal and absolute fact. This designation marks a return to the problem which was left unresolved at the conclusion of chapter four, namely, that if authentic Christian faith involves, not a relationship to some eternal principle passed on by the teacher, but a relationship to the teacher himself then some form of contemporaneity would appear to be an essential element of faith. How is this requirement to be reconciled with Climacus' insistence that the historical contemporary of the God-Man possesses no advantage for faith? In recognising the incarnation as an absolute fact, Climacus observes that it would be 'a contradiction for time to be able to apportion the relations of people to it'.[29] That is to say, the incarnation, which is indeed historical, is not thereby a renunciation of the eternal. In relating himself to the particular history of an individual human being God does not forgo a relationship to the whole of history. On the contrary God's participation in history affirms that same history as the locus of the divine-human encounter. Relationship with God can no longer be conceived as the means by which human beings escape the conditions of their spatio-temporal existence. It is to be conceived instead as mediated through the historical. It is not, be it noted, generated by the historical. The power which reconciles humanity with the Truth is not latent within humanity itself. To think in this way, as theologians through the ages have been wont to do, is again to return to the Socratic. That the fact of the incarnation is both historical and eternal is safeguarded in Climacus' contention that,

> Just as the historical becomes the occasion for the contemporary to become a follower — by receiving the condition, please note, from the god himself (for otherwise we speak Socratically) — so the report of the contemporaries becomes the occasion for everyone coming later to become a follower — by receiving the condition, please note from the god himself.[30]

It is clear here that historical testimony plays a role in the transition to faith. It serves as the occasion through which the individual is confronted with the need to believe or not. But it is not of itself the sufficient ground of faith. Without the condition which is given by the God historical testimony remains indecisive. Apostolic witness has always to wait upon the life-giving breath of the Spirit.

It might be argued at this point that the indispensability of historical testimony gives such testimony an equal claim to be the *sine qua non* of faith, thereby sparking a new round of historical-critical frenzy aimed at authenticating the apostolic witness. This, however,

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29 *Fragments*, p. 99.
30 Ibid. p. 100.

would be to confuse the witness to revelation with the revelation itself and thus to generate an idolatrous historical fundamentalism directly parallel to the bibliolatry of biblical fundamentalism. Climacus himself warns against the temptation to regard the historical witness as imparting the condition for to do so would be to make the witness himself the object of faith and so also the god.[31]

If we are to accept the Climacean alternative to the Socratic and to affirm, therefore, that the human relationship to God is contingent upon the divine gift of the condition, then it becomes clear that to speak of a disciple at second hand is quite inappropriate. 'For one who has what one has from the god himself obviously has it at first hand, and one who does not have it from the god himself is not a follower.'[32] It is in this way that the problem of chapter four is overcome. Faith itself takes the form of contemporaneity with the God-Man precisely because it is contingent upon the gift of the condition given directly by God himself. An entry from Kierkegaard's *Journals* serves to illustrate the point:

> The greatest difference among men is this: to feel God so near that he stands, so to speak, right beside one, near at every moment — or to live on blissfully in the idea that God is removed from one by the distance of 1800 years of history, and that God's nearness is a historical question.[33]

As noted in chapter one above, Climacus' account requires pneumatological elucidation but at least as far as it goes it shares the logic of the Christian story of the self-disclosure of the trinitarian God.

In response then, to questions about whether the immediate contemporary of the God-Man possesses any advantage in respect of faith, or conversely whether historical distance constitutes an insurmountable barrier to faith, Climacus offers a definite 'no'. Despite drawing attention to the incapacity of historical scholarship to pronounce upon the veracity of faith, however, it remains the primary purpose of the *Fragments* to suggest, by way of an alternative to Socratic Idealism, that an historical point of departure, 'the moment in time', is decisive for faith. Climacus proposes, as we have seen, that the human relation to that Truth which is decisive for salvation is attained, not through some ahistorical process of reflection, but by engagement with the God who has made himself present in history. Climacus' dismissal of historical investigation then, is

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31 Ibid. p. 101.
32 Ibid. p. 100.
33 *Journals*, 2/1649, X1^2 A 234,(1854).

not a rejection of the importance of history. He remains insistent that an eternal happiness is decisively dependent upon the individual's relation to the historical figure of 'the god'. The question which has occupied critics, however, is whether it is possible to have the matter both ways.

Is Climacus consistent?

Given that the historical presence of God in the form of a servant is regarded by Climacus as decisive for faith, and if not we return to the Socratic, is Climacus' apparent indifference to historical detail coherent? There appears to be a basic incompatibility between the conviction that the moment in time is decisive for faith and the equally strongly maintained conviction that any attempt to authenticate that moment through historical research is illegitimate. Stephen Evans, who is sensitive to the charge of inconsistency in the Climacean position, comments,

> Both traditional Christians as well as those more liberal Christians still engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus would argue that what must go is the cavalier dismissal of historical evidence. These groups have been suspicious of Kierkegaard for what they perceive as his irrationalism. Many contemporary theologians, on the other hand, convinced that making faith dependent on historical evidence is a recipe for disaster, would argue that what must go is the assumption that faith must be grounded in factual historical events.[34]

While Evans himself does offer a defence of Climacus' position, he too express some unease that Climacus should be so dismissive of historical evidence. I propose to briefly outline both Evans' defence of Climacus and his residual disquiet before proceeding to consider whether his concerns can be allayed.[35] Before going any further, however, it is necessary to note that the term, 'historical evidence' might well be misleading if it is not carefully qualified. We have seen already that beliefs concerning the transcendent and eternal God are quite beyond the province of historical inquiry. There is no historical evidence, for example, which could establish that Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity as is confessed by orthodox Christian faith. I shall assume, therefore, that Evans uses the term 'evidence' to refer to those aspects of Jesus' life which are

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[34] Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 153.

[35] The allegation of an unsatisfactory relationship between faith and historical scholarship is prevalent among critics who are hostile to Kierkegaard. There would seem to be some value however, in concentrating upon the same concern expressed by a commentator who is sympathetic to the Kierkegaardian project and who has demonstrated his profound understanding of Kierkegaard's work. Stephen Evans is certainly in that position. Treatments of the matter can be found in several of Evans' publications but I shall concentrate on the discussion he gives in *Passionate Reason*, p. 152ff.

consistent with particular religious beliefs about him rather than to suggest that there might be historical evidence which could *establish* the truth of such beliefs.[36]

Let us proceed then to consider Evans' proposed defence of Climacus. Evans contends that on Climacus' account, faith is to be regarded as 'properly basic' in Alvin Plantinga's sense of the term. This means that faith, which is grounded in a transforming encounter with Christ, is epistemically antecedent to particular historical beliefs about him. Evans argues, correctly in my view, that belief in Jesus as God[37] must surely involve some true historical beliefs about Jesus but, according to Climacus' scheme, such beliefs, rather than being the basis of an encounter with Christ, are produced as part of the outcome of that encounter. In other words, 'a person might believe in the historical record because of her faith in Jesus, rather than having faith in Jesus on the basis of the historical record.'[38] The historical record is then judged to be reliable by virtue of its coherence with what the person of faith already knows on other grounds. Evans proceeds to point out that this epistemological position does not involve any special pleading for religious belief but can also apply to beliefs held about simple items of sense perception. One might add that knowledge of persons regularly functions in the same way. It is epistemologically respectable, for example, for me to believe what might seem to be an outrageous story about a friend of mine simply by judging it to be consistent with my friend's character. Such a judgement can be made without any objective verification. A stranger, however, has no epistemic ground to decide one way or the other about the veracity of the story.

On this account Evans considers that it is philosophically defensible to argue, as Climacus seems to, that faith in the God-Man functions in the same way but he remains concerned about the propriety of Climacus' supposed indifference to historical evidence, an indifference which Evans contends leaves Climacus vulnerable to the falsification of religious beliefs by historical research. It is theoretically conceivable, for example, if not practically so, that historical scholarship might demonstrate that Jesus never existed or that he never said the kinds of things attributed to him.[39] If such falsification of Christian

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36 There are some theologians who consider that historical detail can establish the veracity of theological confessions about Jesus but this is a position which is deeply problematic. Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus — God and Man* (London: SCM Press 1968) is a leading contemporary advocate of such a view but it has been shown by Colin Gunton, among others, that Pannenberg's position is open to serious objections. See Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, p. 18ff.

37 Although, in deference to a trinitarian doctrine of God one might prefer to express the divinity of Jesus in some other way than the simple attribution, 'Jesus is God', this theological reservation makes no difference to Evans' argument here.

38 Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 156.

39 Both positions have, of course, been advanced by scholars although only the second has ever been

assumptions is even theoretically possible might it not be the case that particular individuals would need to satisfy themselves that such demonstrations are unlikely before they can entertain the possibility of faith? The difficulty here, I think, is not that Evans is wrong — Climacus too wants to maintain the objective ground of faith[40] — but that he conflates Climacus' contention that historical evidence cannot give rise to faith with the claim that historical evidence is irrelevant to faith. I shall try to show why I don't believe that Climacus' espousal of the first view should lead us to suppose that he also intends the second. It is true that Climacus sometimes says that historical scholarship is harmful to faith but his target in such instances is the pretension that historical inquiry can displace the infinite passion of inwardness. Historical inquiry without such pretension might well be another matter.

How much historical testimony is enough?

We shall begin our reassessment of Climacus' position by recalling his oft-quoted contention that,

> Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, 'We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died' — this is more than enough.[41]

The question to be asked is, 'enough for what?' I wish to clear the ground by suggesting two things that it is not enough for. Firstly it is not enough for one to live one's life as a disciple of Jesus. Kierkegaard, as distinct from Climacus, makes this clear in his acknowledged works where he argues that Jesus Christ is both redeemer and prototype. Clearly, Christ's prototypal role requires that those who wish to follow him have reliable information about the character of his life. Kierkegaard's dependence upon this body of reliable (rather than indubitable) information concerning Christ is abundantly evident in the Discourses in particular, but also in *Works of Love* and in *Training in Christianity*. Climacus, on the other hand, offers no opinion about how much historical evidence is enough to sustain a Christian life. His concern is rather with how the individual becomes a Christian in the first place. As he stands at the limit of his understanding, confronted by the paradoxical claim that God has come among us as a servant, Climacus testifies that the best efforts of the historians are to no avail in his passion to know the Truth.

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taken seriously. Many scholars argue that because very few of the reported sayings of Jesus can certainly be attributed to him a radical revision of the character of Christian faith is required.

40 As Evans himself observes. Ibid. p. 152.

41 *Fragments*, p. 104.

The second thing for which the testimony of contemporaries is not enough is for the inquirer to decide whether or not the claim of faith is true. This is an important point because many discussions of the issue appear to labour under the misapprehension that this is precisely what Climacus has in mind. This is all the more surprising because not least among the emphases of the Climacean project is the insistence that human beings are never in a position to judge the Truth. Rather, the appearance of God in time judges humanity, calls into question the criteria by which we presume to decide what is and is not possible for God, and requires that we relinquish our allegiance to the categories within which we have understood the world. This is the human decision and the only human contribution — to let go of the understanding.[42] The individual does not also decide that the Truth is to be believed; that privilege comes as pure gift.

What then is the apparently meagre testimony of contemporaries enough for? Climacus himself suggests that it is enough to be the occasion whereby God grants the condition to the learner. That is all! If the learner confesses, 'I believe...' then such confession is by virtue of the condition alone, occasioned though it may have been by the witness of contemporaries. Having made his point that it is a gift of God rather than contemporary testimony which is the decisive condition of faith I see no reason why Climacus should not then be ready to approve of historical inquiry into the life of Jesus so long as it is understood that such inquiry is conducted under the mandate of faith seeking understanding and not the converse. This is the point at which Evans' defence of Climacus comes into play. A prior encounter with Jesus Christ will very likely incline believers to accept the testimony of contemporaries which might otherwise be regarded as inconclusive. And, as Evans has shown, there is no reason why we should regard such a procedure as epistemologically suspect. The results of any historical inquiry which is carried out under the mandate of faith may well inform the faith which confesses that Jesus is the Christ by illuminating what it will mean to follow him but it certainly cannot establish it. It may well be that some people come to faith after a wide investigation of historical testimony, as Evans wishes to allow, but it remains the case that the testimony, whether extensive or meagre, is no more than an occasion and, unless attended by the presence of the God who gives the condition, is itself of no avail.

Having attained some clarity about Climacus' immediate concern let us return to the question Evans raises about the possible falsification through historical inquiry of the claims of Christian faith. I have already noted that Climacus insists that Christian faith

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[42] See *Fragments,* p. 43.

must be related to an objective ground. Without that objective ground, called 'an historical point of departure' by Climacus, the Socratic proposal for learning the Truth is victorious by default. Thus, although I have spoken above of an apparent indifference to historical detail we would do better to recognise, as I have tried to show, that the assertion that faith is a gift of God rather than the product of historical scholarship, does not at all imply that intellectual effort in the direction of historical inquiry is to be disdained.

In general, neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard consider that the authenticity of the historical reference of Christian beliefs requires much defence but rather treat the biblical witness as *sufficiently* reliable. They would, however, be concerned if their confidence in the Biblical record was shown to be open to serious challenge. It is important to consider, in this regard, what might constitute a serious challenge to the reliability of the Bible. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus allows us to see his own answer to this question. In the course of his discussion about the objective approach to Christianity he considers the efforts of the Biblical scholars before concluding,

> So I assume... that the enemies have succeeded in demonstrating what they desire regarding the Scriptures, with a certainty surpassing the most vehement desire of the most spiteful enemy[43] — what then? Has the enemy thereby abolished Christianity? Not at all. Has he harmed the believer? Not at all, not in the least. Has he won the right to exempt himself from the responsibility for not being a believer? Not at all. That is, because these books are not by these authors, are not authentic, are not *integri* [complete], are not inspired (this cannot be disproved, since it is an object of faith), it does not follow that these authors have not existed and, above all that Christ has not existed.[44]

It is clear that Climacus' confidence in the reliability of the Biblical record is not contingent upon a dogmatic defence of its inerrancy. Nor is it undermined by uncertainties about authorship, textual variants, redactionary processes and so on. None of these scholarly matters, for which Climacus elsewhere admits his respect[45], need constitute a threat to faith. Of particular interest here, however, is Climacus' confidence that the existence of *some* witnesses and, above all, the existence of Christ is secure against the ravages of scholarly endeavour. We should assume, I think, that by the existence of Christ, Climacus refers, not merely to a man who was called by that name, but to a man whose life followed a pattern largely resembling the account which is given

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43 Note the irony here. The desire to falsify Christian faith is typically driven by a passionate commitment no less than the passion of faith itself. The neutral observer is rare indeed.
44 *Postscript*, p. 30.
45 Ibid. p. 25.

of it in the gospels. His confidence to the contrary notwithstanding, we have here an indication that Climacus would regard the falsification of such historical knowledge as a threat to faith.[46] Although Climacus himself clearly thinks that such falsification is very unlikely indeed it is at least a conceptual possibility and ought to lead us, as many commentators have done, to reconsider whether the argument of *Philosophical Fragments* with its apparent indifference to historical detail can really be sustained.

Again it is a matter of being clear about what the purpose of the *Fragments* is. From the opening paragraphs we learned that Climacus is simply attempting to set out an alternative to the Socratic approach to learning the Truth. In essence, the alternative requires firstly, that the Truth is external to us and must therefore be introduced to us in some way, secondly, that we are bereft of the condition for obtaining the Truth, and thirdly, that because of the combination of our lacking the condition and the Truth's externality, the Truth cannot be the product of our own deliberations be they speculative, poetic or historico-critical. Climacus, as we know, considers that the only viable alternative to the Socratic is that both the Truth and the condition for understanding the Truth must be introduced to us by God. This situation he regards as matching the epistemological logic of Christianity. If Climacus is right about this then it follows, as we have seen, that historical testimony may provide the occasion but does not provide the condition for learning the Truth. This does not mean that historical truths are irrelevant to faith, only that pursuit of them will not yield faith. This is all that Climacus is trying to say. That the falsification of certain historical beliefs might nevertheless undermine faith does not imply that faith must after all be built upon a foundation which we supply ourselves.

A positive estimation of historical scholarship

Although it is not germane to the logic of faith which is set out in *Philosophical Fragments* I propose in this final section, in order to try and counter some of the bad press Climacus and his creator have received on this matter, to indicate the value for faith which Climacus and indeed Kierkegaard himself, do place on historical inquiry. It is a matter of regret, I think, that in emphasising, as Kierkegaard certainly does, that the content of faith is beyond the confines of scientific and scholarly knowledge, sympathetic commentators have sometimes given the impression that historical inquiry is therefore to

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46 If my argument here is correct then Ralph McInerny's contention that Climacus is a fideist, i.e 'one for whom nothing that can be known counts for or against what is believed', is surely wrong. See McInerny, 'Fideism in the "Philosophical Fragments"' *Faith, Knowledge and Action: Essays to Niels Thulstrup*, ed. G. L. Stengren (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels 1984) 74-85 p. 79.

be entirely disregarded. Gregor Malantschuk, for example, writes, 'that no historical-critical scientific view of the New Testament can ever have any decisive meaning for Christian faith.'[47] That it cannot have *decisive* meaning indicates that no historical-critical scientific view can provide the condition of faith. We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that historical-critical scientific scholarship cannot, therefore, be pressed into the service of a faith which has been established on other grounds.

In the first place, the value of any religious interest in history is contingent upon there being a historical point of departure for faith. This, of course, is the thesis which the thought experiment advances and despite the semblance of neutrality, is the thesis which Climacus himself prefers. Climacus thus distinguishes himself from those who consider that the truth of faith is independent of particular historical events. Indeed, according to the Climacean view, faith is explicitly concerned with the particular presence of God in time. History is affirmed as the locus of revelation, the medium of God's address to humankind, not, however, in general but in the special instance of his appearance in the form of a servant. Thus neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard are legitimately regarded as precursors of Paul Tillich with his declaration that the only historical entity he required for faith was the historical existence of the text of Mark's Gospel.[48] Apostolic witness is enough to be the *occasion* for faith provided that God sides with such witness, but faith itself is founded upon God's existence in time. Let us consider then four theses, possibly or actually attributable to Kierkegaard, which elucidate the possibility of a positive role for historical scholarship in respect of faith.[49]

a)*The Witness of Contemporaries*

How does the concern with history find positive expression in the Climacean account of faith? First and foremost Climacus attaches positive value to the testimony of contemporaries[50] insofar as hearing that testimony may become the occasion through which later disciples may receive the condition. '*By means* of the contemporary's report (the occasion), the person who comes later believes by virtue of the condition he himself

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47 Gregor Malantschuk, *The Controversial Kierkegaard,* trans. Howard. V. Hong and Edna. H. Hong (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press 1980) p. 69.

48 Cited by William Hamilton in *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press 1993) p. 139.

49 In his discussion of faith and history in *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* Stephen Evans also offers a positive estimation of the relationship between the two. It seems to me, however, too strong to suggest, as Evans does, that faith may, in some respects, be *built* on historical evidence. pp. 256 ff. Faith may well be *nurtured* by historical scholarship but Climacus insists that it is *built* on the foundation of God's bestowal of the condition.

50 Climacus here uses 'contemporary' to refer to those who were historical contemporaries of Jesus Christ rather than in the special sense developed in chapters four and five of *Philosophical Fragments* in which all people of faith are contemporary with Jesus Christ.

receives from the god.'[51] Because Christianity is not reducible to some general teaching but is essentially related to the appearance of God in time it follows, as Evans has pointed out, that some true historical beliefs about Jesus are a constitutive component of faith. Kierkegaard himself says of the order in which one arrives at faith, 'In the first place, each man must have some knowledge about Christ'.[52] The denial of this reliance upon historical knowledge marks a return to idealism and the reduction of Jesus of Nazareth to a mere cipher for some theological agenda imposed upon him from elsewhere.

It is true that knowledge of Christ is most often transmitted through apostolic testimony and does not have the (perhaps illusory) status of 'objective' historical fact. The form of apostolic testimony: 'I believe...' indicates that the content is 'only for faith'.[53] Nevertheless, the testimony does concern an historical event: 'the god has appeared among us'. Far from dismissing the historical as irrelevant it is the identification of a particular historical event as the vehicle of divine revelation to which every individual must give or withhold assent. Certainly, it is God and not the historian who enables assent but it is assent to a fact of history which is required. Accordingly, Climacus considers that the trustworthiness of the contemporary witness with respect to the historical is a matter of legitimate concern.[54] Climacus is well aware that his acknowledgment of the importance of a trustworthy witness is likely to spark a new round of historical deliberation which will again become an excuse to avoid the decision of faith but he does not for that reason desist from affirming that trustworthy historical reference is an essential constituent of authentic apostolic testimony. The hearer must trust that the contemporary's confession of faith refers, not merely to some imaginative construction, but to the concrete particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.[55] It will be the modest function of historical scholarship therefore, to investigate the reliability of apostolic reference to historical facts. Two examples will serve to illustrate the function that Climacus may have in mind.

Although theological criteria were undoubtedly of prime importance in the early church's canonisation of the New Testament texts, historical questions about the reliability of such

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[51] *Fragments*, p. 104.
[52] *Journals*, 1/318, VIII[1] A 565 (1848).
[53] *Fragments*, p. 102.
[54] Ibid. p. 103.
[55] It is important to note that trustworthiness is not equal to infallibility or inerrancy. Faith is critically contingent upon the gift of God not upon the reproduction of the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. In this regard it is quite astonishing that many of those who mock the fundamentalist doctrine of infallible scripture wish to rest the whole of their version of Christian faith upon the minimal body of certain historical knowledge about Jesus. The ironical implication of their own procedure is that only that which is infallible can be trusted.

testimonies were also important. J. N. D. Kelly comments, 'Unless a book could be shown to come from the pen of an apostle, or at least to have the authority of an apostle behind it, it was peremptorily rejected, however edifying or popular with the faithful it might be.'[56] Clearly the identification of such books is a task of historical investigation which serves Christian faith, not, of course, by guaranteeing faith to their readers, but by distinguishing authentic apostolic witness from testimonies whose historical reference to Jesus is of dubious value. Such distinctions assist the Christian Church in its missionary task, understood to be the faithful proclamation of what God has done for us in Christ.

A second example concerns a much more recent testimony to the religious significance of Jesus of Nazareth. In 1992 Barbara Thiering published a book in which she claims that Jesus did not die on the cross as is reported of him in the gospels but merely fainted, was later revived and went on to get married, fathered a family and eventually divorced.[57] Thiering proposes that her reconstruction of the life of Jesus requires a radical revision of traditional Christian faith but it is surely clear that her proposals are, at least initially, candidates for historical rather than theological investigation. Faith is served in this process insofar as historical research is able to confirm or deny that Thiering's 'witness' is trustworthy. Again, because the church seeks to provide the occasion for faith by faithful proclamation of God's appearance in time, the verdict of the historians upon Thiering's work will undoubtedly help the church to decide whether faithful proclamation is aided or hindered by her proposals.

Such examples as I have discussed here seem to offer a plausible interpretation of Climacus' concern for trustworthy apostolic testimony. We must certainly bear in mind, however, that the church's missionary task, to which I have referred, always waits upon the intervention of the Holy Spirit through whom the condition of faith is bestowed. Historical knowledge can never itself become the condition of faith. Nevertheless a first thesis offering positive appraisal of the relationship between historical scholarship and faith is possible: *Insofar as the church, through faithful proclamation of what God has done for us in Christ, seeks to provide occasion for faith, historical scholarship may assist in the identification of trustworthy witnesses.*

b) *Recognising the paradox* [58]

The infinite passion of faith to which Climacus so often refers, is the means by which the

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56 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 60.
57 Barbara Thiering, *Jesus the Man* (London: Doubleday 1992).
58 An extensive discussion of the following role for historical research is given by Vernard Eller in 'Faith, Fact and Foolishness: Kierkegaard and the New Quest'.

person of faith passes through the possibility of offense. In encountering the paradoxical claim that God has come among us in the form of a servant, the individual inquirer arrives quite literally at his or her wit's end and cannot any longer depend on the resources of intellect. But Climacus indicates that these same resources may nevertheless serve the purpose of confirming that the claim of faith does involve a genuine paradox. Such confirmation may well be arrived at speculatively, but historical inquiry may also play a role if, after extensive inquiry, the historian concludes that no amount of historical data can prove or disprove the claim of faith. Historical inquiry, therefore, brings the learner to the limit of its own competence and confirms that the appearance of God in time 'is not a situation which reflection itself is competent to handle.'[59] The operation of historical-critical understanding, at least if it understands itself aright, thus confirms that a decision regarding God in time can only be a matter of faith. This is admittedly a humble role for historical inquiry but not until those of us who place great store by historical inquiry have learned a little humility, will the ground be cleared for faith. Thus a second thesis: *Honest historical inquiry may confirm that a decision regarding the identity of Jesus Christ is beyond its own competence and is therefore to be regarded as a matter of faith.*

c) *The provision of signs.*

A third positive estimation of historical knowledge by Climacus concerns the provision of signs. Although faith is utterly dependent on the grace of God it is not a bolt from the blue. In his discussion of the contemporary follower in chapter four of *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus suggests that certain aspects of the life of the God-Man alerted his contemporaries to the need for a decision in respect of him. Climacus himself is particularly impressed by his lack of concern about material advantage, but his compassion, the wisdom of his teaching, his healing ministry might also attract attention and lead people to wonder whether his background as a carpenter's son from Nazareth does not sufficiently account for the authority which they now witness. Following the author of John's gospel, these things might be called 'signs' which, although not proving Jesus' divinity, nevertheless confront witnesses of whatever generation with the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' It is perfectly in order, therefore, for the tools of historical research to be applied to the life of Jesus in order to illuminate this question-begging character of his life. I can see no reason why Climacus should oppose such investigation, indeed, as we have seen, his own position might well encourage it — so long as historians do not set themselves the illegitimate task of answering the question so posed. When Simon confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus replied, 'flesh and blood

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[59] Eller, op cit. p. 59.

has not revealed this to you' (Matthew 16:17). We cannot proceed with historical investigation on the assumption that flesh and blood might somehow reveal it to us now. Nonetheless, a third thesis is possible: *Historical scholarship may illuminate the degree to which the life of Jesus is provocative of a decision; either to take offense or to believe.*

d) *Jesus as Prototype*

The examples given above which indicate a more positive estimation of historical testimony both pertain to the transition from unbelief to faith, which, of course, is Climacus' special province. The fourth and final area in which history is viewed positively concerns the disciple's relation to Jesus as prototype. It is thus the concern of those who are already disciples and appears, accordingly, in the work of Anti-Climacus and of Kierkegaard himself.

In *Philosophical Fragments* God is portrayed principally as redeemer. The gulf of sin which separates men and women from God is not overcome by the offering of some new teaching but by an ontological transformation of the individual which God alone may accomplish. Frequently in his Journals Kierkegaard pays tribute to the renewal of this insight in Lutheranism but equally he laments, indeed rages against, the cheapening of this grace in Christendom. He writes, for example,

> ...it will be easy to show that the official proclamation of Christianity conceals *the part* about how infinitely great the requirement is for being a Christian (the requirement to imitate [*følge efter*] Christ, to forsake the world, to die to the world, and, which follows, to have to suffer for this teaching...)[60]

Clearly the requirement to imitate requires a body of reliable historical knowledge concerning the character of Jesus' life. Thus, for example, the efforts of scholars in discovering the social conditions which prevailed in Palestine during Jesus' life might well illuminate the radical alternatives which he pioneered and give insight into the pattern of life which is now required of those who would be his followers. Or again, the knowledge yielded by historical inquiry into the religious traditions of his day will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of Jesus' call for a more radical faithfulness to the command of God. Kierkegaard is no more likely to dismiss the fruits of such inquiry than he was to ignore the religious conditions of his own day. He would insist, however, upon two provisos. The first, as has often been repeated, is that we should not imagine that access to the facts of Jesus' biography or to the conditions in which he lived

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[60] *Journals*, 2/1497, XI^2 A 284 (1853-54).

are constitutive of the condition of faith. If Climacus and Kierkegaard himself sometimes express the view that historical inquiry can be harmful to faith[61] it is only because the present age, extending to our time too, labours under the illusion that intellectual prowess gives exclusive access to the truth.

A second proviso which Kierkegaard would no doubt insist upon is that if historical inquiry is to be pressed into the service of faith it must shed its scepticism. As we have noted above, the latest generation of disciples must learn to trust the testimony of those who have gone before. This need not be a blind trust, but neither must it insist upon absolute certainty. One suspects, judging both by Climacus' impatience with the objective inquiry into Christianity and by the extensive use Kierkegaard himself makes of the New Testament record, that both authors regard historico-critical scepticism as simply a means of avoiding the challenge of Jesus' radical claim upon those who would be his disciples. An obedient historical inquiry, on the other hand, will very likely sharpen that challenge all the more. A fourth and final thesis, therefore, might be: *Historical scholarship may serve to illuminate the pattern of Jesus' radical alternative to the prevailing conditions of human culture.*

Just as this chapter began with a reminder that historical scholarship can never give rise to faith, so it is appropriate to conclude with the same caution. If, as I have tried to show, a positive estimation of the relationship between faith and historical scholarship is nevertheless commensurate with Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian faith, it will not be by virtue of a compromise of this fundamental truth. Historical scholarship can neither authenticate the claims of faith nor contribute the condition by which faith becomes possible. A faithful pursuit of historical inquiry, however, can be the means by which people of Christian faith better understand the God who, in the form of a servant, is participant in human history.

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61 e.g. *Postscript,* p. 30.

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LEARNING THE TRUTH

Although the Christian world view has been implicit throughout Climacus' discussion of an alternative to the Socratic approach to truth it is not until the closing paragraph of *Philosophical Fragments* that the Christian character of Climacus' work is admitted explicitly.

> As is well known', Climacus comments, 'Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical — indeed, precisely by means of the historical — has wanted to be the single individual's point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to something historical. No philosophy (for it is only for thought), no mythology (for it is only for the imagination), no historical knowledge (which is for memory) has ever had this idea — of which in this connection one can say with multiple meanings that it did not arise in any human heart.'[1]

In opposition to the Socratic view, Christianity confesses that the Truth[2] is 'learned' neither by speculation, nor through imagination, nor by historical investigation, but rather by virtue of the 'condition' which is given by God. Receipt of the condition by the individual brings about a radical transformation, a 'new birth', which carries ontological, epistemological and ethical significance.[3] My purpose in this chapter is to attempt to elucidate the logic of this transformation in the epistemological sphere and to show that the account of the matter which is advanced in *Philosophical Fragments* is not the judgement of Johannes Climacus alone but helpfully illuminates the broader purpose and structure of Kierkegaard's authorship. It remains true that Climacus and Kierkegaard view from differing perspectives the transition involved in becoming a Christian, but that the change in perspective required is a radical one indeed is the opinion of both Climacus and of Kierkegaard himself.[4] We will continue to be concerned throughout with the

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[1] *Fragments*, p. 109.

[2] Here, as in chapter one, we will be concerned not with the many truths we know but with the Truth which concerns us ultimately and which encounters us in Jesus Christ.

[3] The ethical significance of Christian transformation has not been discussed by Climacus whose primary concern is with the moment of conversion. The ethical ramifications of the 'new life' are readily apparent, however, in Kierkegaard's acknowledged works. See in particular, *Works of Love* and *Christian Discourses*.

[4] I have given an account of the relationship between Climacus and Kierkegaard above. Assuming general

'how' of Christian faith which if truly given, according to Climacus, yields also the 'what'.

We have noted above, particularly in chapter three, that on the Climacean account Christian conversion involves a 'letting go' of human reason. When the individual in 'untruth' is encountered by the God-Man a new condition of understanding is given which requires the abandonment of all preconceptions both about God and about humanity in relation to God. If the individual is to receive from God the gift of the condition then she must be ready to admit the limitations of her rational capacity. Indeed, according to Climacus, reason must 'will its own downfall'.[5] It must allow itself to be addressed by a Truth which is not of its own making. By the standards of reason itself, however, this Truth appears paradoxical and even absurd. It constitutes an offense to reason and can be appropriated by the individual only if reason will yield.

The redemption of reason

An uneasy relationship between faith and reason has long been thought to characterise the Christian proclamation. Tertullian's well known dictum: *Credo quia absurdum est,* is frequently cited on behalf of the view that faith is *contra rationem* while Thomas Aquinas is representative of the alternative position that the deliverances of faith are *supra rationem.* In the first case faith is supposed to contradict reason while in the second no contradiction of reason is involved but it is averred that faith gives access to a truth which lies beyond the scope of reason's competence. Interpreters of Kierkegaard have generally attempted to locate him on one side or other of this traditional debate but the very fact that texts from the Kierkegaardian corpus can be cited in support of both positions ought to alert us to the fact that Kierkegaard cannot satisfactorily be categorised along traditional Tertullianesque or Thomistic lines.[6] An attempt to move beyond the traditional divide has been made by Herbert Garelick who suggests that Climacus, and Kierkegaard himself, holds neither to the one nor to the other view but rather to both.[7] On the one hand, claims

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agreement between them, therefore, I shall only distinguish between them, in what follows, where their respective perspectives warrant special attention.

[5] *Fragments,* p. 37.

[6] Kierkegaard writes in his journals for example, 'God cannot be the highest superlative of the human; he is qualitatively different. From this at first comes incomprehensibility which grows with the development of man's understanding — and thereby faith, which believes against understanding is again potentiated' *Journals,* 1/77, X^3 A 186 (1850). Elsewhere, however, he writes, 'What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is above reason.' *Journals,* 3/3073, IV C 29 (1842-43)

[7] See Herbert M. Garelick *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard,* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1965) p. 33.

Garelick, 'Climacus finds faith to violate standards of proper reason, contradicting the laws of logic' while on the other Climacus 'maintains... that reason and faith do not conflict on the existential level'.[8] Garelick further explains: 'It is the Paradox that reveals that *irrationality is not equivalent to existential impossibility and rationality is not equivalent to reality or existence....* Reason must, when confronted with the Paradox, understand that it cannot understand.'[9] The point, of course, is directed against the Hegelian identity between the rational and the real. Thus Kierkegaard contends that the appearance of God in time requires the abandonment of 'truths' to which reason had given its assent (faith against reason), but the existence of the God-Man also requires reason to give up its claims to omnicompetence and to admit the possibility of truths, or more particularly, a Truth, which it can neither confirm nor deny (faith above reason).

Garelick's suggestion certainly has the merit of attempting to do justice to both aspects of Kierkegaard's thought but I suspect, along with J. Sperna Weiland, that 'The question if Kierkegaard meant with his doctrine of the *absurdum* the absurd as 'contrary to the understanding' or as 'beyond the understanding'... is essentially a second rate question. Kierkegaard's concern is especially to show that this fact, the *absurdum*, is withdrawn from the grasp of the Understanding.'[10] The important point to be recognised is not whether faith is above or against reason but that revelation is not at reason's disposal. In support of Weiland we may refer to Climacus who says, 'the understanding certainly cannot think it [the paradox], cannot hit upon it on its own, and if it is proclaimed, the understanding cannot understand it and merely detects that it will likely be its downfall.'[11] The point is simply that revelation cannot be coerced: God is free,[12] which is to say after all that it is not reason but faith, a gift from God, which is the condition through which the learner may apprehend and understand the Truth.

There remains, however, a question about what becomes of reason in the transition to Christian faith. Certainly it must relinquish its claim to final authority in order to make way for faith but it is apparent in the authorship as a whole that Kierkegaard thinks that reason too, may be included in that redemptive reconciliation with God which is made possible through faith in Jesus Christ. The opposition between faith and reason

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid. p. 44. The point is supported by Kierkegaard himself who writes in his Journals 'it is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things which it cannot understand, and what those things are.'

10 J. Sperna Weiland *Philosophy of Existence and Christianity,* p. 87.

11 *Fragments,* p. 47.

12 This is, of course, the point made by Karl Barth in his confession that God reveals Himself as Lord. *Church Dogmatics,* trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1936) 1.i, p. 339.

represented in Kierkegaard's concept of the Absolute Paradox, and the 'letting go' of reason are to be seen as stages on faith's way while the reconciliation of which Johannes Climacus speaks in the *Fragments* ultimately concerns our understanding too.

The point of departure for this contention is the claim met above in chapter three, that 'when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd — faith transforms it...'[13] Not surprisingly, given the importance of the categories of paradox and the absurd in Kierkegaard's authorship, this is a claim which has provoked considerable scholarly debate. It is clear, of course, that the believer and the unbeliever stand in a different relationship to the central object of Christian faith. The question at issue, however, is whether this difference is cognitive. Is the incarnation rendered intelligible through the medium of faith or is faith to be regarded as some sort of non-cognitive relation to the Truth? Alastair McKinnon is among those who argue for the first position while Gregory Schufreider thinks that the transformation of the absurd by faith establishes a non-cognitive relation to the Truth. In order to do justice to the respective arguments, however, we need to set the above quotation concerning the transformation of the absurd in its broader context. Kierkegaard writes,

> The absurd is a category, and the most developed thought is required to define the Christian absurd accurately and with conceptual correctness. The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd — faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd — if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge.... Rightly understood, there is nothing at all frightening in the category of the absurd...[14]

Both McKinnon and Schufreider contend that this broader context provides the clue to interpreting the claim that the absurd is not the absurd for faith. They arrive, however, at widely variant conclusions. McKinnon thinks, first of all, that,

> The words 'rightly understood' offer the clue. 'Rightly understood,' the absurd or the paradox is not at all intellectually terrifying; it is not a plea for absurdity or irrationalism. It can be mastered; it can be transformed so that it is no longer absurd. The believer is not committed to a life of permanent and incorrigible self-contradiction. In some sense at least it is possible to achieve the

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13 *Journals,* 1/10, X^6 B 79 (1850). In similar vein Kierkegaard had written in 1844, 'The paradox presumably can be conquered and digested, as it were, for retrogressive thinking...' *Journals,* 3/2345, VC I (1844).
14 *Journals,* 1/10, X^6 B 79 (1850).

> state of belief and in that state all properly logical or conceptual conflicts can be resolved.[15]

According to McKinnon, Kierkegaard employs the categories of paradox and the absurd to summarise the verdict of unbelief upon the Christian confession of the incarnation. The incarnation is not itself intrinsically absurd or paradoxical but only appears that way from within the pervasively dualist framework of human reason. This is a view with which we have concurred above. Our former agreement notwithstanding, however, we are unable to follow McKinnon in asserting that by faith 'all properly logical or conceptual conflicts can be resolved'. The difficulty here is not that there *are* residual logical or conceptual difficulties, but that McKinnon's claim appears to override Kierkegaard's own insistence that 'faith is not a knowledge'.[16] McKinnon's position seems to imply that it is.

It is just this distinction between faith and knowledge which Schufreider thinks is critical. He writes,

> To say that the absurd is not the absurd for faith is *not* to claim that it has been mediated by knowledge, as if faith were a kind of knowing. Instead, it is completely obvious, when cited in its entirety, that what the entry does mean to be contending is that *faith is a sphere by itself*. We could not conclude from this that faith comprehends the absurd, for if it did... 'then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge.'[17]

As I have indicated above, Schufreider is wholly justified in drawing attention to Kierkegaard's concern to maintain a distinction between faith and knowledge but there are difficulties for his position as well. In particular Schufreider's claim that faith and knowledge are 'different spheres' cannot easily be reconciled with Climacus' 'thought project' in *Philosophical Fragments* in which faith is presented as that condition which enables us to *learn* the Truth.[18] Climacus' rejoinder to the Socratic doctrine of recollection in which human reason is put forward as the condition of learning is not that

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[15] Alastair McKinnon, 'Kierkegaard, "Paradox" and Irrationalism' in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company 1969) 102-122, p. 110f.

[16] This distinction between faith and knowledge is made in the Journal entry cited above and appears also in *Fragments*, p. 62. See also *Practice in Christianity*, p. 26 where Anti-Climacus writes, 'About [Christ] nothing can be known; he can only be believed.'

[17] Gregory Schufreider, 'Kierkegaard on Belief Without Justification' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12 (1981) 149-164, p. 153.

[18] It must be conceded that Climacus himself suggests that 'faith is a sphere by itself' but he means, I think, that faith is an existence medium rather than a system. This does not preclude there being a necessary relationship between knowing and being or knowing and doing. Cf Kierkegaard's comment in the *Journals*: 'What I really need is to get clear about *what I must do*, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act.' *Journals*, 5/5100, 1 A 75 (1835).

the Truth *cannot* be learned but that it may be learned only under that condition which is given by God and which comes as a gift of grace. Thus, although McKinnon and Schufreider both draw attention to aspects of the case which must be maintained, neither account, in my estimation, manages to do justice to all the facts of Kierkegaard's position. In particular an attempt must be made to reconcile Climacus' proposal for 'learning' the Truth in which faith is the *sine qua non,* with his (and Kierkegaard's) contention that faith is not a knowledge. It is of course possible that no reconciliation of these two aspects is possible and that Kierkegaard is simply inconsistent. This is not obviously the case, however, and in this and the following chapter I shall attempt to show the coherence of Kierkegaard's position.

The concept of metanoia

Although Kierkegaard himself does not employ the term, the epistemological position advanced in the *Fragments* and supported elsewhere in the authorship is precisely that which is suggested by the New Testament concept of *μετανοια* (metanoia).[19] Variously translated in the New Testament as 'repentance' or 'conversion', the conjunction of *meta* and *vous* means literally 'a change of mind' but is employed by the New Testament writers to suggest a profound transformation of the whole person. J. Behm and E. Würthwein explain that in the proclamation of Jesus, *metanoia* 'affects the whole man, first and basically the centre of personal life, then logically his conduct at all times and in all situations, his thoughts, words and acts...'[20] They further explain that *metanoia* is both 'God's gift and man's task'.[21] It is regarded by Paul as 'the result of divine action' and as 'the change of thought and will which releases from evil and renders [the individual] obedient to the will of God.'[22] Of particular importance for our present concern, Johannes Behm notes elsewhere that metanoia is conceived by Paul as a conversion to the knowledge of Truth (*Umkehr zur Wahrheitserkenntnis*) and is as such, a gift of God.[23] Although less prominent in New Testament usage *metanoia* also carries the sense of regret and sorrow over one's former state (See Luke 17:3f. and 2 Corinthians 7:9f.). The resemblance here between *metanoia* as it is used by the New

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19 I shall return to the matter of Kierkegaard's familiarity with the Greek term in Chapter six where attention will be given to Kierkegaard's use of *Omvendelse,* the usual Danish translation of *metanoia* in the New Testament.

20 J. Behm and E. Würthwein, 'Μετανοεω and μετανοια' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* (hereafter TDNT), Vol. IV, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1967) 999-1008, p. 1002.

21 Ibid. p. 1001.

22 Ibid. p. 1005.

23 Johannes Behm, 'Metanoia: Ein Grundbegriff der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung' *Deutsche Theologie* 7 (1940) 75-86, p. 85.

Testament writers and the transformation described by Climacus in the first chapter of *Philosophical Fragments* is noteworthy, particularly in respect of the mutual conviction that Christian conversion involves the renewal of our minds.[24] The possibility suggested here is that Christian faith ultimately involves neither the abandonment of reason (*contra rationem*) nor an addition to reason (*supra rationem*) but rather reason's redemption. Of course, for those who would retain an absolute allegiance to the deliverances of their own intellect the Truth will remain a paradox. Those who are prepared to let go of such allegiance, however, may participate in the life of him who says 'Behold I make all things new' (Revelation 21:5). There are epistemological lessons to be learned in the injunction of Jesus' that 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:25).

We have noted in earlier chapters that Kierkegaard's response to those who, in the name of reason, would challenge the Christian doctrine of the God-Man, is to ask after the competence of reason to pronounce upon such a matter.[25] The canons of reason are not neutral as is often supposed but are themselves the product of a particular world view, typically a dualist one, whether it be the cosmological dualism between the *cosmos noetos* and the *cosmos aisthetos* of Plato, the Cartesian dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* or the Kantian dualism between phenomena and noumena. However much Hegel, with his phenomenology of spirit, attempted to escape such dualisms his philosophy does not attain the hoped for reconciliation of the eternal and the temporal but is simply the sublation of the latter by the former. Hegel thus retains the prejudice of his above mentioned forebears against the Biblical notion that history is the locus of divine self-disclosure. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, considers that those who have eyes to see and ears to hear are those who by God's grace have been able to let go of such limited frameworks and to perceive the world anew under the condition which is called faith.

This then is what is suggested by the concept of *metanoia*. Conversion to Christian faith involves at the epistemological level a transformation of the understanding. Articulated metaphorically in terms of the leap of faith and more prosaically in terms of the absurd being no longer absurd for faith Kierkegaard sets out, in full conformity with the New Testament, the logic by which one's vision of God incarnate may be by faith

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[24] Although the term is not used by Paul in this instance, his admonition in Romans 12:2; 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect', captures the essence of *metanoia.*

[25] For further discussion of the competence and particularly the partiality of reason see Merold Westphal *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society,* p. 23ff., and Louis Mackey, 'Philosophy and Poetry in Kierkegaard' *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (1969) 316-332, pp. 323ff.

transformed.

There is nothing particularly novel in the recognition of the epistemological transformation involved in Kierkegaard's account of Christian conversion. Alastair McKinnon has drawn attention to the fact that 'Kierkegaard frequently and repeatedly distinguishes between a Godly (*gudeligt*) and a worldly (*verdsligt*) understanding.'[26] Similarly, C. S. Evans has spoken of the adoption of new plausibility structures,[27] M. Jamie Ferreira has discussed the comparability of Kierkegaardian transitions with Gestalt switches and paradigm shifts[28] and Alastair Hannay has noted similarities between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein's discussion of life views.[29] As I shall hope to show, each of these discussions has its merits particularly in respect of the recognition that in negotiating the stages on life's way fundamental transformations of one's understanding are effected. It is important to recognise, however, the distinctive aspects of Christian conversion to which Kierkegaard draws attention and which are unlike Wittgenstein's Gestalt switches, Berger's plausibility structures or Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shifts. Indeed the particular transition from unbelief to Christian faith is also to be distinguished from the transitions which Kierkegaard himself describes in the aesthetic and ethical spheres.[30] The fruitfulness of comparison with Wittgenstein and Kuhn notwithstanding, it is in order to safeguard the distinctively Christian aspects of epistemological transformation that the concept of metanoia, drawn as it is from the New Testament, has been chosen to elucidate the Kierkegaardian account of Christian conversion.

Gestalt switches

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[26] McKinnon, 'Søren Kierkegaard' *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West,* p.198.
[27] Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 264f.
[28] M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision.* Ferreira has also discussed the matter in two journal articles, 'Kierkegaardian faith: 'the condition' and the response', and 'Kierkegaardian Transitions: Paradox and Pathos' *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31.1 (1991) 65-80.
[29] Alastair Hannay *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1982) p. 149f. A more comprehensive comparison of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein dealing with this and other matters is provided by Charles L. Creegan in his book,*Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard* (London and New York: Routledge 1989). For an opposing but less convincing view see, John W. Cook, 'Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein'.
[30] Ferreira's account in particular suffers from a failure to recognise the distinctive aspects of Christian conversion. Her exposition of the transition from unbelief to Christian faith is for the most part, an extrapolation of Judge William's description of the shift from the aesthetic to the ethical way of life. In consequence Ferreira places an unwarranted emphasis upon the role of the imagination and downplays the critical category of grace. She is critical of Evans, Penelhum and Gouwens along with David Wisdo, for 'assuming a false dichotomy between grace and human activity' but my judgement would be that the emphasis these scholars place on grace is more faithful both to Kierkegaard himself and indeed to the New Testament. See Ferreira, *Transforming Vision,* p. 149 note 18.

In her comparison of Kierkegaardian transitions with Gestalt switches, Ferreira first draws attention to the 'qualitative change' which characterises both. There is a 'breach of continuity' involved in the transition from unbelief to belief which is signified by Climacus' category of the 'leap'.[31] The adoption of Christian faith, like the switch which enables one to see first a duck and then a rabbit in the same picture, is not a matter of evolutionary progress. It is for this reason that Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments,* sought an alternative to the view that reason or imagination or historical investigation might constitute a *scala paradisi.*

A second analogy between Gestalt switches and Christian conversion to which Ferreira draws attention, is that in neither case is the transition a matter of volition. One cannot simply decide to see the rabbit where previously one had only been able to see the duck and in like manner one cannot simply decide to believe that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth God is present among us.[32] Ferreira explains that,

> in a situation where a *Gestalt* shift can occur initially we can see only one possibility (for example a duck figure); at some point, after concentrated attention or perhaps after coaching or guidance, another alternative (a rabbit figure) comes into focus for us... We can directly do what will in all probability lead us to see the figure, but we cannot directly make ourselves see it. Recognising it, then, is a qualitative transition which is not achievable by fiat; it is not the direct result of willing, nor is it the necessary result of the effort to look for it.[33]

Several points emerge here in comparison with the case of Christian conversion. First of all, as has been noted above, belief is not the product of will. One does not believe anything simply by virtue of deciding to do so. One may, however, want to believe or want to see in the case of the Gestalt switch but seeing or believing is 'not the necessary result of the effort to look for it'.

Secondly, some effort on the part of the learner is legitimate and may well be rewarded. In the case of belief I would not go so far as to say, as Ferreira does of the Gestalt switch, that making the appropriate effort 'will in all probability' enable us to believe but

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31 It is important to remind ourselves here that the leap is a Climacean category which in the acknowledged works, as we shall later elucidate, is qualified by Kierkegaard's pneumatology.
32 Ferreira maintains this point against Terence Penelhum and Louis Pojman who erroneously insist that Kierkegaard has a volitional understanding of conversion. See Penelhum, *God and Scepticism* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company 1983) and Pojman,*The Logic of Subjectivity*.
33 Ferreira, *Transforming Vision,* p. 34f.

Christian theology must take seriously the promise of Jesus that whoever seeks will find and whoever knocks will see the door opened to them. It is important however, that it is Jesus who utters this promise, for its fulfilment is contingent upon divine grace and not upon some process which can be activated from the side of humanity. In Kierkegaardian terms the effort to believe in the God-Man might be made by availing oneself of the witness of contemporaries. Sharing in the life of the Christian community and reading the Scriptures, for example, may be conceived as opportunities so to avail oneself but in these or in any other circumstances the learner must wait upon the grace of God, unless indeed, the reading of Scripture and the participation in the life of the Christian community are already attributable to God's leading and grace.[34] In a subsequent chapter, Ferreira, still referring to Gestalt switches and following a suggestion of William James, describes the effort made to 'see' as 'attentiveness'. The description applies equally well to the attitude appropriate for anyone who would learn the Truth which is manifest in Jesus Christ. Christian faith is possible only by virtue of the fact that in Christ we have been addressed by God. It is this Divine address which engenders attentiveness and such attentiveness in its full realisation is constitutive of worship. The worship which stems from attentiveness to the Word of God requires, of course, that the clamour of human words be silenced. It is for just such a silence that Kierkegaard himself appeals in *For Self-Examination:*

> If, in observing the present state of the world and life in general, from a Christian point of view one had to say (and from a Christian point of view with complete justification): It is a disease. And if I were a physician and someone asked me 'What do you think should be done?' I would answer, 'The first thing, the unconditional condition for anything to be done, consequently the very first thing that must be done is: create silence, bring about silence; God's Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with noisy instruments, then it is not God's Word; create silence![35]

This attitude is taken up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, quoting Kierkegaard, counsels that 'Teaching about Christ begins in silence. "Be silent, for that is the absolute" (Kierkegaard)'.[36] Those who would learn the Truth would do well also to begin there.

Returning to Ferreira's comparison between Gestalt switches and Christian conversion it

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34 Intimation is given here of a distinctive difference between the Gestalt switch and Christian conversion, to which we shall later return, namely the agency of an Other and the interpersonal nature of the transition to faith.

35 *For Self-Examination,* p. 47.

36 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London: Collins 1966) p. 27.

is important to note that the Gestalt switch is by no means intended to provide an exhaustive analogy to the transition to Christian faith as this is understood by Kierkegaard. Ferreira readily admits the limitations of the analogy and seeks to complement it with another which we shall come to shortly. The most obvious disanalogy is the freedom in the case of Gestalt switches to go back and forth between the alternate visions. Such freedom cannot be said to be present in the case of Christian conversion which involves a decision in favour of the truth value of the new vision and against the falsity of the old. Faith in the God-Man on the one hand, and rejection of the incarnation as incoherent and absurd on the other, are not equally valid options which the individual may variously switch between. This is the reason why *Philosophical Fragments* had to be published under the name of a pseudonym. The standpoint of unbelief which is occupied by Johannes Climacus cannot be represented as Kierkegaard's own view even though Kierkegaard himself may give his assent to the Climacean account of what constitutes authentic Christian faith.

Ferreira, secondly, points to the limits of the category of 'seeing-as', employed by Wittgenstein in particular in his discourse about Gestalt switches. This second disanalogy is closely related to the first because the logic of 'seeing-as' has no use for questions about truth and falsity. While Christian faith in Jesus as God-incarnate makes no claim to be demonstrable the person of faith is nevertheless committed to the view that 'what we see *as* the truth Christianly *is* the Christian truth about God and the world.'[37] Without the proviso of this ontological reference the Gestalt switch analogy opens the way to a relativistic and non-realist understanding of Christian faith which Kierkegaard himself would certainly have rejected.[38]

The limitations of the Gestalt switch analogy are corrected, Ferreira suggests, by holding to it alongside a second analogy, namely the semantic transformation which occurs in metaphorical speech. Drawing upon Janet Martin Soskice[39] who defines metaphor as that 'whereby we speak of one thing in terms suggestive of another',[40] Ferreira contends that Judge William's account of the transformation from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere is analogous to the metaphorical transformation of meaning. In imagining the prospect of a transition from aesthetic to ethical existence the aesthete sees his or her '(actual) self in

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37 Sue Patterson puts the matter this way in her article 'Theological Geography' in *Theological Fragments: Essays in Honour of Alan Torrance,* eds. D. Bruce Hamill and Murray Rae, (Dunedin: Lada Publications 1994) 8-18, p. 16.

38 On which, see Evans, *Passionate Reason,* chapter ten.

39 Along with Eva F. Kittay, Max Black and Paul Ricouer.

40 Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985) p. 49.

terms suggestive of the other ideal self.... The actual is put imaginatively in tension with the potential in another domain, and they interact so as to achieve a transfer'.[41] Such change, according to Ferreira, is a metaphorical process. She further contends that 'the value of seeing the transitions of which Judge William and Climacus speak as metaphorical processes is that doing so makes clear the decisiveness of the reorientation which is achieved and its character as a cognitive advance; the parallel with a visual *Gestalt* shift does not make this clear.'[42]

Be that as it may it is in fact Judge William and not Climacus who elucidates the transition between the aesthetic and the ethical stages of life. Climacus' account of the transition from unbelief to faith is another matter and is not adequately described in terms of a metaphorical transformation. In Ferreira's discussion the imagination is set forth as the 'condition' by which existential transformation becomes possible. But this is explicitly refuted by Climacus in the case of Christian conversion. He writes, 'This matter of being born — is it thinkable? Well, why not? But who is supposed to think it — one who is born or one who is not born?... It must, of course, be one who is reborn, for it would be unreasonable to think that one who is not reborn should do it, and would it not be ludicrous if this were to occur to one who is not reborn?'[43] If we understand nothing else of *Philosophical Fragments* surely we must be clear that Kierkegaard means to insist that becoming a Christian is critically contingent, not upon some native human capacity, but upon the grace of God. Ferreira proposes that we conceive of the matter the other way around. For this reason, the positive elements of her discussion notwithstanding, our verdict must be that she fails to do justice to unique and critical aspects of the case of Christian conversion. We must conclude with Ferreira, however, that while some parallels to Christian conversion as elucidated by Kierkegaard can be found in the concept of Gestalt switch the concept must be supplemented or perhaps even replaced altogether by more adequate models. Failing this we are in danger of returning to the Socratic.

Paradigm shifts[44]

An obvious candidate for such supplementation is Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts in science for which, according to Kuhn himself, the concept of Gestalt switch

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41 Ferreira, *Transforming Vision,* p. 79f. Recall our discussion of the role of imagination in chapter two.
42 Ibid. p. 80.
43 *Fragments,* p. 20.
44 Ferreira's *Transforming Vision* contains a short discussion of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shifts with which I largely agree. My own discussion, however, seeks to make a number of different points. See Ferreira, pp. 72f.

serves as 'a useful elementary prototype'.[45] The argument of Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* is that progress in science is not, as is often supposed, a matter of continuous evolutionary advancement. A gradual accumulation of knowledge which builds on that which is already known may certainly take place and does so within what Kuhn calls 'normal science', but the most significant advances in science are radically discontinuous with what has gone before. They are revolutionary rather than evolutionary and set scientific thinking in an entirely new framework. Such revolutions or 'paradigm shifts' as they have been called by Kuhn are 'a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalisations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications.'[46] A paradigm shift creates new structures of understanding which enable the scientist to understand features of the universe which were previously enigmatic or paradoxical or simply unknown.

Several points of interest for the case of Christian conversion arise from Kuhn's discussion. Firstly, scientific revolutions take place, according to Kuhn by virtue of a qualitative leap. New paradigms are radically discontinuous with the old. Accordingly, there is nothing to be done within the old paradigm which may be a propaedeutic for the new. By the standard of the new paradigm those who continue to operate within the old exist in untruth[47] and employ structures of understanding which compel them to dismiss the claims of those who have undergone a paradigmatic transition. Thus Kuhn's account of paradigm shifts in science bears at least some resemblance to the Climacean thought project in *Philosophical Fragments.* In both cases the truth is learned only under the condition of a revolutionary epistemic transformation and remains opaque to those who will not let go of the old way of seeing the world.[48]

Interestingly for our comparison with Kierkegaard's account of Christian conversion, Kuhn contends that paradigm shifts are prompted by the emergence of anomalies within

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45 Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 2nd edn. enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970) p. 85.

46 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* p. 85.

47 I recognise that the introduction of the question of truth at this point requires further discussion. It would be possible, for example, to conceive of Kuhn's paradigms simply as more or less successful strategies for achieving one's aims in the world. Operational success is not necessarily the same thing as truth. Thus I will return to the question of truth below.

48 Kuhn's account of scientific progress has not, of course, gone unchallenged and it must be admitted that it is not without significant ambiguities. Several features of Kuhn's account are well established however, and these are critical for the comparison which we seek to advance here. These include the recognition that a degree of relativity characterises all our thinking but that this need not commit us to assert the relativity of truth, and further, that the growth in scientific knowledge is at certain points revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

the reigning paradigm. An anomaly, Kuhn explains, is a feature of reality which violates the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science.[49] Anomalies are thus relative to a particular paradigm. Kuhn draws a distinction between anomalies and 'puzzles' the resolution of which within the canons of an existing paradigm is the quotidian task of normal science. Puzzle solving thus contributes to the refinement of a particular paradigm. An anomaly, on the other hand, represents a crisis for the existing paradigm, laying bare its explanatory limitations and presenting an impetus for its replacement. An anomaly may not, of course, be immediately recognised as such so that a particular scientific problem may for many years be investigated under the assumption that its resolution within the existing paradigm is possible. Although Kuhn himself does not suggest so, it may be that an anomaly is only recognised as incapable of resolution within an existing paradigm once commitment to that paradigm has been withdrawn. Fruitful comparison may be drawn here, I would suggest, with Kierkegaard's contention that the incarnation is a paradox. The 'paradoxical' co-presence of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ simply cannot be accounted for within the prevailing estimations of what is and what is not possible for God. Instead, the appearance of Jesus among us is only recognised as the divine presence through a cognitive revolution which transforms the way we understand both God and the world. It is of course possible that the persistent denial of the incarnation may be warranted by the truth of the matter. Alternatively, however, such persistence may reveal the inadequacy of our paradigms and their inability to comprehend the Truth. It is clear that the truth claim involved in the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the servant form of God cannot be assented to under the condition of the presuppositions and investigative procedures supplied by Western thought but Kuhn's account of cognitive progress in science lends credence to Kierkegaard's contention that in theology too it is legitimate to ask after the adequacy of the prevailing world view.

A third point of interest arising from Kuhn's work concerns the character of human reason. If Kuhn is right, and Kierkegaard, I think, would have been disposed to agree with him, then reason cannot itself be regarded as a framework or paradigm, much less an absolute or neutral one, but must rather be understood as a tool, very likely among others, which makes possible the heuristic functioning of a particular paradigm. It is because of this that there is a discontinuity between one paradigm and another. Reason is constrained by the paradigm within which it operates and cannot be the means by which that same paradigm is undermined and replaced. Kierkegaard himself makes the same point with the following comment upon Hegelianism; 'And every one who has even a

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[49] Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 52f.

little dialectic will perceive that it is impossible to attack the System from a point within the System.'[50] Insofar, however, as reason may recognise incompleteness or paradoxes within a given paradigm it may help to provide motivation for a paradigm shift but it is not itself the condition of change or 'conversion' as Kuhn himself describes it:

> The conversion experience that I have likened to a Gestalt switch remains, therefore, at the heart of the revolutionary process. Good reasons for choice provide motives for conversion and a climate in which it is more likely to occur. Translation may, in addition, provide points of entry for the neural programming that, however inscrutable at this time, must underlie conversion. But neither good reasons nor translation constitute conversion...[51]

This, we have suggested, bears significant resemblance to Kierkegaard's understanding of the position of reason in respect of Christian faith. Reason, operating within the prevailing paradigm of the western philosophical tradition, recognises the implausibility of the incarnation and is bound, therefore, to deny that in Jesus of Nazareth we encounter the servant form of God.[52] Out of admiration for Jesus of Nazareth it may seek to accommodate Jesus within the prevailing paradigm, to treat him as a puzzle to be solved, but it typically begins, as Anti-Climacus trenchantly observes, by letting him be dead.[53] It is possible however, along lines analogous with paradigm shifts in science, that this procedure constitutes a refusal to allow one's thinking and world view to be transformed by the reality which is before us in Jesus Christ.

The alleged discontinuity between paradigms is a critical feature of Kuhn's contention that science sometimes makes progress through revolution. But in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn leaves us with some troubling questions. He claims, for example, that paradigm shifts effect 'a closer agreement between theory and fact' and implies thereby that in the event of a paradigm shift cognitive progress has been made.[54] The difficulty with this is that if there is a radical discontinuity or as he sometimes puts it, a 'total incommensurability', between paradigms how is one to judge that 'closer agreement' has been attained. This is a question to which Nicholas Jardine devotes

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[50] *The Point of View for My Work as an Author,* p. 131n. In relation to this feature of systems (or paradigms) Walter Sikes comments, 'The System is invulnerable if one grants it the two essential elements of any system — its methodology and its presuppositions. It was then the task of Climacus to refute it on these two grounds.' Walter Sikes, *On Becoming the Truth* (St Louis: Bethany Press 1968) p. 64.

[51] Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* p. 204.

[52] Recall Climacus' assertion in chapter one of the *Fragments* that ignorance is a form of bondage which is Christianly understood as sin.

[53] *Practice in Christianity,* p. 107.

[54] *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* p. 27.

attention in his book, *The Fortunes of Inquiry.* Jardine contends, while not denying the occasionally revolutionary nature of scientific progress, that the alleged incommensurability, if conceded, invalidates all claims to discern any progress in the historical process of scientific investigation.[55] While theology will not be able to proceed to the overcoming of this problem in just the same way that Jardine proposes for the sciences some principles of Jardine's strategy do bear comparison with the position developed by Kierkegaard. Jardine proposes in the case of science that a theory can be judged to be a cognitive advance upon an earlier theory when the difficulties of an earlier theory are both understood and resolved by the latter. In explanation of this strategy Jardine writes,

> ...let us consider in the most schematic of terms certain possible outcomes of an encounter between divergent traditions of inquiry *I* and *I'*. When continued inquiry in *I'* leads to resolution of the divergences in favour of *I*, we have *assimilation* of *I'* by *I*. When continued inquiry in *I* generates an explanation for the divergences in terms of error or inadequacy in *I'*, we have *domination* of *I'* by *I*. When *I* eventually resolves all its divergences from *I'* by assimilation, domination, or some combination of the two, we say that *I* is *resilient* in the face of *I'*. [56]

It is consistent with Jardine's proposals that the results obtained through *I* remain opaque and perhaps paradoxical to the scientist who is committed to *I'* while the results and errors of *I'* are readily comprehensible to the scientist committed to *I.* In Jardine's terminology one theory has been shown to be 'reducible' to the other. 'When past theories are reducible to current theories cumulative resolution of questions has occurred and, in typical instances, transcendence of error as well.'[57] The unidirectional commensurability between the two inquiries is thus indicative of progress having been made in the transition from *I'* to *I.* By this means Jardine claims to avoid the relativisation of truth while safeguarding the Kuhnian insight that our thinking is constrained by the commitments we have to particular theories, paradigms or world-views.

It is clear that certain critical differences between science and theology do not permit a simple transference of Jardine's proposals from one to the other. Unlike science, for example, confirmation of the reducibility of one theory to another cannot be obtained in

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55 Nicholas Jardine, *The Fortunes of Inquiry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986) p. 25. Paul Feyerabend expresses the same concern when he argues that on Kuhn's account 'it is impossible to say that [a paradigm change] has led to something *better*'. 'Consolations for the Specialist' in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge,* eds. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press 1970) 197-230, p. 202.
56 Ibid. p. 48.
57 Ibid. p. 60.

theology by empirical means. As we shall discuss further in chapter eight, Kierkegaard thinks that certain forms of life, suffering with Christ, love of neighbour, existential reduplication of one's proclamation and so on, are consistent with the claim to cognitive progress in theology but such consistency is not amenable to experimental verification. Despite differences, however, between the grounds for asserting cognitive progress in science and in theology, some principles of Jardine's position can also be found in Kierkegaard's work. In the *Journals,* in the small pamphlet, *On My Work as an Author,* and in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author,* Kierkegaard contends that he understands his work only retrospectively: 'So it is that I understand everything *now*', he says, 'From the beginning I could not thus survey what has in fact been my own development.'[58] In the same pamphlet Kierkegaard explains that the movement of the authorship was '*from* the poet (from aesthetics), *from* philosophy (from speculation), to the indication of the most central definition of what Christianity is — **from** the *pseudonymous* 'Either /Or', **through** 'The Concluding Postscript' *with my name as editor*, **to** 'The Discourses at the Communion on Fridays...'(Kierkegaard's emphases).[59] While it was not possible, by Kierkegaard's own account, to understand the later stages of his authorship from the point of view of the earlier, the final and explicitly religious stage sheds light upon the whole. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn explains,

> ...what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic stage or sphere can be understood better from the perspective of the aesthetic-religious stage than in isolation. Similarly, one can better understand the earlier ethical stage in terms of the latter religious one towards which it points and to which it is related. But both of these stages are best understood retrospectively, that is, from the rigorously Christian point of view which is the final or ultimate one in Kierkegaard's entire authorship.[60]

Employing the terminology proposed by Jardine we may say that the earlier stages are assimilated to the latter and dominated by it. That is to say, both the aesthetic and the ethical stages are thoroughly comprehended by the religious and more particularly by the Christian point of view, while the same does not hold in reverse.[61] The point is further supported by Kierkegaard's contention that the aesthetic and the ethical are 'transfigured' rather than left behind in the transition to Christianity. One does not cease to exist at an

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58 *On My Work as an Author,* p. 154.
59 Ibid. p. 146.
60 Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, 'The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production' *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results,* ed. Alastair McKinnon (Montreal: Wilfred Laurier University Press 1982) 18-38, p. 37.
61 Karl Barth makes essentially the same point when he speaks of the preacher of God's Word having to understand atheists better than they understand themselves. *The Göttingen Dogmatics,* vol.1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990) p. 86.

aesthetic and an ethical level in the transition to Christian faith but the aesthetic and the ethical are refigured according to the new prototype which is found in Jesus Christ.

We have noted already that empirical verification of the reducibility of the aesthetic and the ethical to the Christian life view is not available, at least not insofar as one could supply evidence for public consent. Nevertheless, the individual who makes the commitment of Christian faith does believe that the whole of life conforms to a more intelligible pattern when seen in the light of Christ. Commensurate with the revolutionary nature of cognitive progress in conversion, it is not a pattern which could have been anticipated, indeed it very frequently confounds the wisdom that is favoured by the world, but ultimately the Christian bears witness to a Truth in whose light all things are judged and their truth or falsity laid bare. This last point is important, for the standard or criterion of theological truth is not one which we supply ourselves be it through reason, imagination or memory, but is rather the Truth which is disclosed in Christ. Thus the assurance of Christian faith will take the form, 'I know the one in whom I have put my trust' (2 Timothy 1:12).

Jardine's account of progress in science has in common with Kuhn's account the affirmation of an unsymmetrical relationship between theories or paradigms.[62] In contrast with a Gestalt switch, a paradigm shift or the reduction of one theory to another indicates a preference for the truth value of the new paradigm or theory so that the difference between the old paradigm and the new is not simply the difference between seeing a particular picture as a duck or as a rabbit but is rather the difference between seeing and not seeing the truth. This is the difference to which Climacus draws attention with his discussion of the *autopsy* of faith. Whoever sees the God-Man with the eyes of faith sees not only differently but also more truthfully than the contemporary eyewitness.[63] The more apt comparison with Wittgenstein concerns, therefore, not the possibility of visual switching between a duck and a rabbit but the qualitative advance from *photographic* seeing to *Gestalten* seeing, from apprehending the configuration of a visual object to comprehending its identity.[64] Thomas Kuhn teaches us further that our capacity for *Gestalten* seeing is constrained by the paradigms within which we investigate the world. In the case of Christian faith Kierkegaard implies that allegiance to inadequate paradigms determines why, on encountering Jesus, human beings are liable to take offense rather

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62 This is a point made by Ferreira in her discussion of Kuhn, loc cit.

63 See *Fragments*, pp. 70 and 102.

64 See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* Part 2/xi, trans. G. E. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1974) p. 193. The designation of Wittgenstein's two types of seeing as *photographic* and *Gestalten* seeing comes from Creegan,*Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard*, p. 45.

than believe.

The point is illuminated by Jesus' conversation with the disciples about his true identity (Matthew 16: 13-20 and Luke 9: 18-20). He asks, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?', to which the disciples reply, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' These are a sample of the answers for which experience has equipped them. But if Jesus is unique, and the confession of the incarnation surely implies that he is, then past experience can hardly be the measure against which his identity is to be understood.[65] Uniqueness (novelty is the word used by Kuhn) demands a revision of our cognitive frameworks. The point is made by Jesus himself when in response to Peter's confession that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, Jesus says, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matthew 17:17). The cognitive resources of 'flesh and blood' are inadequate to the task. Only a divinely inspired transformation of his understanding, indeed of his whole person (witness the name change) can be the means by which 'Peter' learns the Truth.[66]

It is worth commenting before we continue, that our use of the concept of 'paradigm shift' to elucidate the transition from unbelief to faith is to be distinguished from the undoubtedly more familiar use to which it is put in theology by Hans Küng, David Tracy and many of the other contributors to the volume *Paradigm Change in Theology*.[67] Küng and Tracy et al. are concerned to recognise the changes wrought in theology through times of cultural and political crisis be they internal to theology itself or endemic in the wider culture. Their concern is to trace major shifts in the focus and perceived tasks of the theological enterprise within the community of faith whereas the crisis and change which I have sought to describe by analogy with paradigm shifts in science concerns the transition by which an individual becomes a person of faith in the first place.[68] This more basic use of the concept is noted in the Küng/Tracy volume both by Josef Blank and by Eberhard Jüngel. Jüngel writes, 'theology has to do with a paradigm change *sui generis:*

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[65] This, incidentally, is the fundamental flaw made by Wolfhart Pannenberg in his attempts to base Christology upon historical investigation. The lessons of past experience are sufficient warrant, Pannenberg alleges, for orthodox claims about Jesus' divinity. The difficulty here is that neither Jesus' uniqueness nor the authority of past experience are sufficiently appraised. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man,* trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press 1968).

[66] I owe this insight to Alan Torrance who made the point in lectures given at Otago University in 1988.

[67] Edited by Hans Küng and David Tracy, trans. Margaret Köhl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1989).

[68] The notion of paradigms in theology has also been given attention by Ian Barbour but again he has very little to say about the paradigm shift involved in Christian conversion. In my view, Barbour also gives insufficient attention to revelation and thus treats theological models and paradigms almost exclusively as human constructs. See *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (London: SCM Press 1974).

the existential change in human understanding conveyed in the phrases τα της σαρκος φρονειν and τα του τνευματος φρονειν (Romans 8:5).[69] It is in this sense that I will continue to use the term although in the next chapter I shall be drawing attention to aspects of Christian conversion for which the scientific paradigm shift is an inadequate analogy.

Plausibility structures

With the same concern to elucidate the epistemological ramifications of Christian conversion as has occupied us in this chapter, Stephen Evans draws an analogy between the Christian world-view and Peter Berger's notion of 'plausibility structures'.[70] A 'plausibility structure', Evans explains, is a belief pattern established on the basis of past experience both personal and collective and functions as a framework through which new candidates for belief are evaluated. 'Candidates for belief', Evans notes, include all claims to historical knowledge.[71] Sharing Hume's recognition that a logical uncertainty attends all existential judgements, but wanting to move beyond Hume's scepticism, Kierkegaard seeks to affirm the validity of subjective judgements. Although such judgements are made in terms of prior passions and commitments Kierkegaard contends that they may nevertheless be true. It is not the truth which is sacrificed through the employment of subjective judgement but rather objective certainty. But, for Kierkegaard, this merely reveals the limitations of the objectivist programme. It simply cannot account for much of what is given to be known. This is the meaning of Climacus' contention that 'a system of existence cannot be given'.[72] In questions of existence, i.e, for all synthetic judgements, there is no objectively certain ground upon which to stand. Foundationalism in respect of existential concerns is simply an illusion. We may readily admit that where there is subjectivity there is also risk and yet there is really no alternative. Those who think that there is and who propose an objective standard for all knowledge have, in Climacus' words, 'forgotten what it means to exist.' Authentic existence, on the other hand, demands subjectivity, passion and commitment. It is commitment to a particular way of viewing and understanding the world. Or as Evans has put the matter, it is a commitment to a particular plausibility structure.

The name Climacus gives to that passion by which particular plausibility structures are

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69 Eberhard Jüngel, 'Response to Josef Blank' in *Paradigm Change in Theology* (1989) 297-304, p. 297f.
70 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 264ff.
71 Thus Lessing's famous problem concerning the approximate nature of historical truth.
72 *Postscript,* p. 118.

acquired — not always consciously as Evans points out — is faith. Evans comments further: 'There is nothing distinctively Christian or even religious about such faith; Climacus thinks it is a general human passion.'[73] He does make a distinction however, as Evans notes, between faith in the ordinary sense and faith in the eminent sense.[74] While what is true of ordinary faith is also true of Christian faith, and thus the validity of our comparisons between Christian conversion and cognitive revolutions in other fields, faith in the eminent sense has certain distinctive characteristics to which we shall return below.

In the meantime Evans' discussion illuminates a number of features of faith in the ordinary sense which are applicable also to the Christian case. Firstly, faith is a characteristic of all existential judgements. There is no special pleading involved in the recognition that Christian truth claims are not demonstrable. Secondly, faith is a commitment by which uncertainty is overcome. There is a time, according to Wittgenstein, when we must be able to stop doing philosophy.[75] Such cessation is precisely what enables us to go on, not, of course, in the Hegelian sense of 'going beyond',[76] but in the sense of acting, of engaging ethically in life on the basis of commitments made. Thirdly, 'faith does not have to be self-consciously reflective; this helps make intelligible Climacus' claim that it is quite possible for the simple and uneducated person to be a Christian. What is required is faith, not a reflective understanding of faith's nature.'[77]

Life views

The qualitative transition to a new paradigm or plausibility structure which is implicit in Climacus' account of Christian conversion has been articulated by some scholars in terms of Kierkegaard's own category of 'life-views'.[78] In general these commentators are not so much concerned to illuminate Kierkegaard's understanding of conversion by means of comparison with transitions in other spheres, as we have done above, but to draw from Kierkegaard himself the distinctive features of the transition from one life view to another.

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73 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 266.
74 *Fragments,* p. 87.
75 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 133.
76 On which Kierkegaard offers caustic comment in the 'moral' at the conclusion of the*Fragments.*
77 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 266.
78 See, for example, Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard,* p.149f., and Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971) p. 184f.

The concern with life-views was a feature of Kierkegaard's work from its inception. His first major publication, *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), is a critique of his contemporary, Hans Christian Anderson, who is criticised for the absence of life-views in his novels. Kierkegaard contends that 'a life-view is, for a novelist of the class to which Anderson belongs, *conditio sine qua non.*'[79] A novel which presents only a kaleidoscope of ideas without any unifying principle gives no basis upon which to engage with life. Yet to find such a basis is our most urgent existential task. The urgency which characterises the task is a prominent feature of Kierkegaard's own biography. His early concern to 'find a truth which was true for me', a life-view with which he could unreservedly identify himself is charted in his authorship and his *Journals* alike and was the project which he was to urge upon every individual.[80] He early recognised that commitment to a life-view was not assent to a set of propositions nor the mere accumulation of experience. It is rather to be understood as the 'transubstantiation of experience'.

> If we now ask how such a life-view is brought about, then we answer that for the one who does not allow his life to fizzle out too much but seeks as far as possible to lead its single expressions back to himself again, there must necessarily come a moment in which a strange light spreads over life — without one's therefore even remotely needing to have understood all possible particulars, to the progressive understanding of which, however, one now has the key... [81]

Here in his first book Kierkegaard gives notice of the single most important theme of his pseudonymous authorship, namely, the adoption of a viewpoint on life. Subsequent explorations of the theme yield significant elaborations and refinements but the basic position remains throughout the authorship. In particular the life-view is considered to be a light by which experience is understood. It is not the cumulative product of experience itself. Nor does the life–view provide immediate comprehension of all particulars. It does not enable us to view the world *sub specie aeterni* as Hegel purported to do. Rather the life-view provides us with a framework of interpretation through which we organise our experience. Concerning the question of how life-views come to be acquired Kierkegaard suggests that there is a certain mystery about this: 'a *strange* light spreads over life', but

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79 Kierkegaard, 'From the Papers of One Still Living' *Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkin (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990) 53-102, p. 77.
80 Despite the close relation between Kierkegaard's works and the struggles of his own life it is a mistake to delve too deeply into this relation. Some biographical knowledge is of course, indispensable to the understanding of his work but we should not be so occupied with Kierkegaard that we avoid the existential challenges he poses in his work to 'that solitary 'individual' whom with joy and gratitude I call my reader'.
81 'From the Papers of One Still Living', p. 77f.

such illumination is apparently given to the one who 'does not allow his life to fizzle out too much but seeks as far as possible to lead its single expressions back to himself again'. Ferreira's notion of attentiveness seems again to be an appropriate description of this reflective sensitivity.

In 'From the Papers of One Still Living' Kierkegaard speaks of only two life views, the human and the religious. Despite the subsequent distinctions in the human life view between the aesthetic, the ethical and religiousness A, giving the impression, along with religiousness B, that there are four stages, it can be argued that Kierkegaard conceived of only a single Either/Or between life as it was humanly understood and life understood Christianly.[82] Kierkegaard makes the following distinction between the two:

> [A life-view is] an unshakeable certainty in oneself won from all experience [*Empirie*], whether this has oriented itself only in all worldly relationships (a purely human standpoint, Stoicism, for example), by which means it keeps itself from contact with a deeper experience — or whether in its heavenward direction (the religious) it has found therein the center as much for its heavenly as its earthly existence, has won the true Christian conviction 'that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor the present, nor the future, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'[83]

Of particular interest here is Kierkegaard's suggestion that a purely human or immanental concern 'keeps itself from contact with a deeper experience'. The suggestion is that which we have been pursuing throughout, namely, that our capacity to apprehend and understand the Truth is constrained and limited by prior life-views. This is why Climacus proposes that learning the Truth is contingent upon our being liberated from them.

The world Christianly understood

Throughout the foregoing comparisons we have attempted to show that human attempts to understand the world do not take place in a vacuum. They do not begin, as Hegel would have it, from nothing.[84] Rather our cognitive engagement with the world takes

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82 That Kierkegaard is ultimately concerned with only a single Either/Or is also the view of James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard,* p. 207. More importantly, Kierkegaard himself comments in his *Journals,* 'There are only two views of life which correspond to the duality that is man: animal and spirit. According to the one the task is to live to enjoy life, and to put everything into this. The other view is: the meaning of life is to die.' 1/1005, XI[1] A 528 (1854).

83 'From the Papers of One Still Living' p. 76f.

84 See *Hegel's Science of Logic,* trans. A. V. Millar (New York: Humanities Press 1969) pp. 70 and 73, and for Kierkegaard's comment upon this see *Journals,* 3/3306, VI A 145 (1845).

place within value-laden frameworks of interpretation.[85] Thus our truth claims about the world are not isolated tokens awaiting dispassionate scrutiny at the bar of objective reason. Instead they emerge from and are constitutive of a paradigm, a life-view or a plausibility structure. The question of *Philosophical Fragments,* therefore, concerning how the Truth may be learned is inseparable from the distinctions that must be made between competing life-views. And it is for this reason that Climacus insists that attention must be given to the 'how' of Christian faith before we can properly speak of the 'what'. To reverse the order is mistakenly to assume that the 'what' is accessible under the condition of some universal, human cognitive capacity. It is for this reason too that Kierkegaard was opposed to Christian apologetics at least insofar as apologetics is conceived as the attempt to validate the claims of faith in terms of a competing philosophical framework.[86] In Kierkegaard's view such an attempt could only result in an accommodation of the Gospel to the prevailing culture[87] and thus to the loss of the Gospel. He writes,

> If one were to describe the whole orthodox apologetic effort in one single sentence, but also with categorical precision, one might say that it has the intent to make *Christianity plausible*. To this one might add that, if it were to succeed, then would this effort have the ironical fate that precisely upon the day of its triumph it would have lost everything and entirely quashed Christianity.... To make Christianity plausible is the same as to misinterpret it.[88]

The misinterpretation arises because Christianity cannot be made plausible within any paradigm other than one for which faith in Jesus Christ is itself the starting point. For this reason Christian proclamation urges *metanoia.* It offers a radically new understanding of the world for which the condition is not some human capacity but a faith which is God-

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[85] The importance of this for theology has been amply demonstrated by feminist and liberation theologians in particular who challenge the eurocentric and masculine bias of traditional theology. This recognition does not, however, as some argue, commit us to a relativist view of truth.

[86] The identical position adopted by Karl Barth in the Prolegomena to *Church Dogmatics* would appear to be derived directly from Kierkegaard. The rejection of apologetics does depend upon how apologetics is understood. Accordingly, Stephen Evans has argued on more than one occasion that Kierkegaard himself might be viewed as an apologist for Christianity ('Apologetic Arguments in 'Philosophical Fragments" IKC 7, 63-83) or that certain definitions of apologetics may be consistent with the central concerns of Kierkegaard and Climacus (*Passionate Reason,* p. 90). While maintaining Kierkegaard's rejection of any effort to justify Christian faith within the terms laid down by unbelief, a point which Evans too approves, I accept Evans' basic concern that would allow for reason to be pressed into the service of faith. I will return to this matter below.

[87] It is often alleged, usually in the interests of discarding the theological claims of the Church Fathers and indeed of the Gospels themselves, that this is precisely what took place in the Hellenistic context of early Christianity. Such allegations are invariably based on a superficial understanding of patristic theology which, while readily employing Hellenistic vocabulary and conceptuality, did so precisely in order to challenge the accepted 'wisdom' of the time.

[88] *On Authority and Revelation,* p. 59.

given. It will be the task of the next chapter, following the foregoing comparisons of metanoia with epistemological transitions in other fields, to elucidate the distinctive aspects of that transformation which is possible through *pistis Christou.* [89]

Before we attempt that task however we must review the suggestion made at the outset of this chapter concerning the possible reinstatement of reason, following its abandonment, as a tool in the service of faith. What we are suggesting is that reason too may be included in that redemptive reconciliation with God which is made possible through faith. While reason is not able to effect the transition from one paradigm to another, it may nevertheless be operative within the new paradigm. The cognitive framework has certainly been radically transformed but reason is pressed into the service of this new paradigm in order to elucidate its structure and develop its explanatory power. If the parallels drawn between paradigm shifts in science and the Kierkegaardian account of Christian conversion are valid then we are bound to ask whether in the case of Christian faith too, reason might play its part.

To begin with, one may certainly make the general point that Kierkegaard himself uses reason throughout the authorship and does so with the intention of making clear what Christianity is. *Philosophical Fragments* is itself an attempt to elucidate the logical distinctions between the Socratic and the Christian ways of learning the Truth. Clearly then, Kierkegaard cannot be advocating the complete rejection of reason. On the contrary, as I think we have seen, Kierkegaard is calling for the recognition of reason's limitations and especially for the recognition that the transition to Christian faith is not something which reason can accomplish. The simple reason for this is that, because of human sin — humanity's existence in untruth — reason itself stands in need of redemption. Reason itself stands in need of reconciliation to that Truth which alone makes possible an authentic existence before God.

In this regard Louis Pojman's analysis of the difference between Kierkegaard and Hegel is instructive. Pojman writes,

> That feature of reason which Kierkegaard valued most is 'necessary connection', the aspect

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89 There is a mounting body of opinion among Pauline scholars in particular, which recognises a subjective genitive in the Greek phrase thus implying that the decisive condition of soteriological transformation is not *our* faith but our sharing in the faithfulness of Christ. See, for example, George Howard, 'Faith of Christ' *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 2, 758-760. This is an opinion with which I believe Kierkegaard would be sympathetic. Witness, for example, his unambiguous emphasis upon faith as a gift along with his discussion of grace whereby it is the faithfulness of Christ which atones for human failure.

> emphasised by deductive logic, wherein one proceeds by the 'laws of logic' from given assumptions to valid conclusions. Reason... cannot ensure that our assumptions are true, nor can it tell us which assumptions to start with; but once we have our assumptions, reason can show the implications in the assumptions. In this respect, he professes to differ radically from Hegel who thought that reason can somehow bring us to the truth.[90]

We would do better, in the case of Christian faith, not to speak of the Word of God as an 'assumption' but insofar as that Word is the Truth giving rise to a radically transformed understanding of the world, Kierkegaard certainly thinks, against Hegel, that reason cannot bring us to the Truth. The rational investigation of the implications of that Word is nevertheless a task which Christian theology in general and Kierkegaard in his particular way, have legitimately attempted.

Some support for this reading of Kierkegaard can be found among the scholarly literature, in particular from James Collins who thinks that Kierkegaard makes the explicit claim that reason is good in itself and is capable of being redeemed.[91] I do not find the references Collins offers quite so explicit but there is certainly a suggestion in *Two Ages* that if the 'prerequisites' according to which reason operates are 'religiously taken over' then a 'higher meaningfulness' becomes possible.[92] This seems very close to the view which we have been attempting to outline.

Stephen Evans is another who, on several occasions, discusses the matter. He is less assured than Collins but admits that it may be legitimate to understand Climacus as proposing the reinstatement of reason in the service of faith. Evans thinks it paradoxical of Climacus to deny, on the one hand, that faith can be understood while on the other hand, offering a literature which seems designed to help us understand faith[93] but he concludes that the paradox is attributable to the two different standpoints represented in Climacus' work. Accordingly, Christianity is incomprehensible from the standpoint of unbelief but can be understood, at least in part, from the standpoint of faith. Elsewhere, however, Evans laments Kierkegaard's apparent rejection of reason *per se* and wonders whether it might not be preferable to regard reason itself as one of the things which is changed in religious conversion.[94] This possibility is of course precisely that which I

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90 Louis Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity*, p. 24.
91 James Collins, 'Faith and Reflection in Kierkegaard', p. 151.
92 *Two Ages*, p. 96.
93 Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 277.
94 See 'The Epistemological Significance of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Kierkegaardian Exploration' *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991) 180-192, p. 190, and also *Passionate Reason*, p. 91.

think Kierkegaard himself does propose. I have attempted to provide support for that view throughout this chapter but it is possible also to adduce the direct support of Climacus himself. Returning to the basic question which occupies him in *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus asks in chapter four, 'How then, does the learner become a believer or a follower?' And he responds, 'When the understanding is discharged and he receives the condition.' That much is clear but then Climacus goes on to ask, 'This condition, what does it condition?' to which the reply is given: 'His *understanding* of the eternal' (My italics).[95] Surely the point here is that, while human understanding is inadequate to the task of comprehending the eternal, the impact of the eternal itself upon the learner transforms his understanding and renders him capable of faithfully, while not yet incorrigibly, interpreting that which is disclosed to him.[96]

Looking to the non-Climacean works we find Kierkegaard in *For Self-Examination,* making the point in a characteristically imaginative way. Seeking to elucidate the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit, Kierkegaard tells the following parable.

> Once upon a time there was a rich man. At an exorbitant price he had purchased abroad a team of entirely flawless, splendid horses, which he had wanted for his own pleasure and the pleasure of driving them himself. About a year or two passed by. If anyone who had known these horses earlier now saw him driving them, he would not be able to recognize them; their eyes had become dull and drowsy; their gait lacked style and precision; they had no staying power, no endurance; he could drive them scarcely four miles without having to stop on the way, and sometimes they came to a standstill just when he was driving his best; moreover they had acquired all sorts of quirks and bad habits, and although they of course had plenty of feed they grew thinner day by day.
>
> Then he called in the royal coachman. He drove them for a month. In the whole countryside there was not a team of horses that carried their heads so proudly, whose eyes were so fiery, whose gait was so beautiful; there was no team of horses that could hold out running as they did, even thirty miles in a stretch without stopping. How did this happen? It is easy to see: the owner, who without being a coachman meddled with being a coachman, drove the horses according to the horses' understanding of what it is to drive; the royal coachman drove them according to the coachman's understanding of what it is to drive.[97]

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95 *Fragments,* p. 64.

96 If this reading of Kierkegaard is correct then the popular conception that Kierkegaard 'espouses an absolute dichotomy between knowledge and faith and assigns religion to the realm of feelings and morality' is surely mistaken. Such a conception is represented here by Jerry H. Gill in his article, 'Kant, Kierkegaard and Religious Knowledge' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 28 (1967) 188-204, p. 196.

97 *For Self-Examination,* p. 85f.

In explanation of the parable Kierkegaard comments, 'So also with us human beings. When I think of myself and the countless people I have come to know, I have often said to myself sadly: Here are capacities and talents and qualifications enough but the coachman is lacking.'[98] I see no reason why Kierkegaard should not have considered human reason to be among the 'capacities and talents and qualifications' so referred to and thus also to be redeemable under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The nature of that redemption will be the subject of the following chapter.

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98 Ibid. p. 86.

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METANOIA

In contemplating the claim of Christian faith that in Jesus of Nazareth God is present among us, Johannes Climacus considers that acceptance of such a claim cannot be justified under the conditions of human reason. The incarnation is paradoxical. It is an absurdity which can only be accepted if the canons of reason are to be abandoned. In the preceding discussion, however, we have asked, following Kierkegaard, about the authority of such canons of reason and we have attempted to explore the suggestions of a number of contemporary commentators who have argued that reason is not absolute but is constrained by the paradigm, plausibility structure or world view within which a particular individual is operating.

It was recognised in the preceding chapter that although reason is utilised within paradigms, the very fact that it is constrained by those paradigms means that it cannot function as the 'court of appeal' to which competing truth claims are brought and settled. The employment of reason in justifying a new paradigm always takes place under the condition of the set of assumptions which are constitutive of the new paradigm and, where the change is truly revolutionary, cannot, therefore, provide a logical route to the new from the old. This process, we have said, bears significant resemblance to the conversion by which Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, is re-cognised as the Holy One of God.

There is, however, an obvious and very important difference between the kinds of cognitive revolution we have examined in the preceding chapter and the conversion which is urged upon us in Christian proclamation. Put simply, the difference arises because, as Climacus himself has put it, there is 'an infinite qualitative difference' between God and the world. The account of scientific progress provided by Kuhn, for example, is concerned with the cognitive revolutions that may be involved in furthering our understanding of 'the furniture of the world', to borrow a phrase from Karl Rahner. God, however, is not a part of that furniture and we must therefore allow for the possibility of significant differences between cognitive progress in respect of the world of which we are a part and cognitive progress in respect of God. Those differences will emerge in the course of this chapter as we turn our attention to the distinctive character of

Christian conversion.

Untruth and sinfulness

One of the most important themes of *Philosophical Fragments* is the proposition by Climacus that the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity has epistemological ramifications. Climacus expresses this by suggesting, initially for the sake of argument, that human beings exist in untruth. So far Climacus has not said anything controversial, but when he goes on to claim that this existence in untruth is appropriately called sin and is to be regarded as a kind of bondage, he enters one of the critical debates of theology. For Climacus claims that if cognitive error is a manifestation of human sinfulness then its overcoming cannot be a matter of the exercise of our natural capacities. A natural way forward in theology, and indeed in the life of faith as a whole, has been closed off to us.[1] It is for this reason that the incarnation is considered to be the *absolute* paradox and is distinguished from a relative paradox which, potentially at least, is resolvable by an effort of human reason. Human sinfulness (untruth) separates the individual from God 'infinitely' and 'qualitatively' and it is this separation which renders the appearance of God among us absolutely incomprehensible. 'How then', asks Stephen Evans, 'can such a thing be believed? Climacus says it is only possible by a miracle, the miracle of faith.'[2] Faith, on this view, and here Kierkegaard parts company from the prevailing philosophical and theological opinion, cannot in any way be regarded as a human achievement. Humanly speaking it is an impossibility. Sin, according to the Christian story, is overcome by the miracle of divine grace. If Climacus is right in locating cognitive failure in the realm of human sinfulness then in seeking the Truth the learner is dependent upon the salvific intervention of God. This, as we have seen, is precisely the story that Climacus tells in chapter one of *Philosophical Fragments*. It is for this reason, according to Climacus' thought project, that 'the god' is not only a teacher but is recognised also as 'saviour', 'deliverer' and 'reconciler'. So also is Christian conversion to be distinguished from cognitive revolutions in other fields.

The sinful character of the old paradigm, life view or plausibility structure, absent from the accounts of transition given in chapter five, is an integral part of that transition which the New Testament calls *metanoia.* Accordingly, *metanoia* is frequently rendered as

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[1] Recall Climacus' parable about the knight who, having the choice to fight for one of two competing armies, chooses one and then is defeated. He cannot then reverse his choice and offer to fight for the other side. He is bound by the choice he has made. The situation is the same with sin, suggests Climacus. Having chosen to live in opposition to God we cannot then find our own way back to God's side.

[2] Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 268.

'repentance' in English translation. The transformation of our minds which makes possible the recognition of God's presence with us in Jesus Christ also enables recognition of the inadequacy, the error and the sinfulness of the old way and engenders the sorrow of repentance. Repentance, says Climacus, is sorrow 'that for so long one should have remained in one's former state'. The sin-consciousness which is a *conditio sine qua non* of Christian conversion is so emphasised by Kierkegaard that it becomes for him a critical distinguishing mark of Christianity.[3] Anti-Climacus contends that 'It is specifically the concept of sin, the teaching about sin, that most decisively differentiates Christianity qualitatively from paganism...'[4] And it is sin-consciousness which constitutes a decisive difference between *metanoia* and the cognitive revolutions which were earlier used to shed light upon the epistemological ramifications of Christian conversion.

It might be supposed that paradigm shifts in science which imply a preference for the truth value of a new paradigm over against the untruth of the old, provide a parallel to Christian repentance in which sin is replaced by faith,[5] but that there is progress or improvement in both cases is not the focus of our present concern. The point rather is that human sinfulness is radical and renders the individual utterly dependent upon God. An inadequate paradigm in science may well be construed as a kind of bondage just as sin is described as bondage in *Philosophical Fragments,* but not least among the emphases in Kuhn's account of the structure of scientific revolutions is that scientists themselves have the capacity to overcome such bondage. They have the capacity for cognitive progress - even revolutionary progress. Such capacity is precisely what is denied in the Kierkegaardian account of Christian conversion for which the condition is a gift given by God.

That the condition is not withheld, despite human sin, is described in Christian terminology as the miracle of forgiveness. Sin-consciousness does not of itself constitute a new beginning for the learner. It is through forgiveness, explains H. A. Smit, that all

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[3] Because sin-consciousness appears, particularly in Anti-Climacus' *Sickness Unto Death,* to be a pre-requisite of faith, many commentators have thought this to be a human contribution which must be accomplished before God will act. Although a number of texts may be cited in refutation of such a claim the most appropriate response comes from Anti-Climacus himself who in the course of commenting on the difficulty of being a Christian, asks, "But if the essentially Christian is something so terrifying and appalling, how in the world can anyone think of accepting Christianity?' Very simply and, if you wish that also, very Lutheranly: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way (*from the other side grace is the force*), into this horror' (my italics). The implication here is that God in grace is active throughout. See *Practice in Christianity,* p. 67.

[4] *Sickness Unto Death,* p. 89.

[5] Anti-Climacus contends, we recall, that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. *Sickness Unto Death,* p. 82.

becomes new in Christ:

> This is the wonder of the new creation, the renewal of everything in a way that does not make it other and yet makes it qualitatively different, a wonder that stands opposed to all comparative or evolutionary progress. This provides Christianity with the unique consciousness and starting point from which it builds up a new system. Just as Christianity came into history as something absolutely new, so the life with Christ marks a wholly new beginning for each individual. Thus the new stands in complete and irreconcilable contrast with the old, Christianity with all philosophy.[6]

The transition to Christian faith, made possible through the miracle of forgiveness, involves, as Smit makes clear, a unique consciousness and starting-point. Christian faith constitutes a radically new way of understanding the world although, in order to avoid any suggestion of Hegelian pretension, we would do well to avoid calling it 'a new system'. More accurately, as Smit goes on to point out, Christian faith is a matter of embarking upon a new existence in relationship with Christ.

That epistemic transformation occurs through relationship is the second major difference between Christian conversion and paradigm shifts in science. *Metanoia* is to be distinguished not only because of the radical, rather than relative, inadequacy of the antecedent paradigm but, correspondingly, because of the utter dependence upon another to effect the required transformation. Behm and Würthwein again explain,

> This unconditional requirement [for conversion] is not met by man's own achievement. In Mt. 18:3 Jesus shows from the example of the child what 'to convert', 'to become another man', means for Him: εαν με → στραφητε και γενεσθε ως τα παιδια, ου μη εισελθητε εισ την βασιλειαν των ουρανῶν. To be a child is to be little before God, to need help, to be receptive to it. He who is converted becomes little before God, ready to let God work in him. The children of the heavenly Father whom Jesus proclaims are those who simply receive from Him. He gives them what they cannot give themselves (cf. Mk. 10:27 par.). This is true of metanoia. It is God's gift, and yet it does not cease to be a binding requirement... Behind the call for conversion which Jesus issues with his announcement of the rule of God there stands the promise of the transformation which he effects as the One who brings in this rule (cf. Mt. 11: 28 ff.).[7]

It is the view of Johannes Climacus and of Søren Kierkegaard too that this dependence upon the transforming power of God, necessitated as it is by human sinfulness, is one of

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[6] H. A. Smit, *Kierkegaard's Pilgrimage of Man*, p. 99.
[7] TDNT vol. 4, p. 1003.

the key features distinguishing the Christian from the Socratic account of how one learns the Truth. To dispense with the miracle of divine grace is, in the matter of epistemology, to offer something other than Christianity.

A relational epistemology

Along with the epithet, 'The father of existentialism', one of the most commonly held appraisals of Kierkegaard is that he was guilty of a brand of individualism which left him insensitive to the importance of ecclesial community and led him to be dismissive of efforts to consider the social and political ramifications of the Christian Gospel.[8] It is certainly the case that the prominence of the category of the individual (*Den Enkelte*) in Kierkegaard's works along with a series of vehement attacks upon the Church has left him vulnerable to such charges and it is true, I think, that there is legitimate cause for criticism in this area.

Equally, however, there are currents of Kierkegaard's thought that run strongly counter to the individualism which has dominated Western culture. Not least among these counter-currents is the relational epistemology which has begun to emerge in our discussion so far. Kierkegaard's insistence that whoever would learn the Truth must recognise their dependence upon the agency of God represents a fundamental contradiction, not only of Socrates, but also of the self-sufficient epistemologies which were developed in the 'Age of Reason'.[9] The Enlightenment dictum 'dare to think for yourself' carried with it the assumption that reliable access to the truth requires that we also think *by* ourselves. The assertion of independence from all external authority was an unmistakable symptom of an age which trusted epistemic success to the unfettered deliberations of the individual intellect. Witness, for example, Hegel's confidence that 'The spirit of man contains reality in itself, and in order to learn what is divine he must

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[8] Mark Taylor is one who prosecutes this charge in *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, chapter eight, while Vernard Eller in *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978), puts the case in Kierkegaard's defence. This is a matter to which Karl Barth also refers. Barth agrees with Kierkegaard 'that the question of the individual Christian subject has to be put and that it has to be answered with the *pro me* of faith', but he cautions that we 'must emphasise also the *pro nobis* of the faith of the Christian community and the *propter nos homines* of its representative faith for the non-believing world'. *Church Dogmatics*, IV.i, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1956) p. 755.

[9] René Descartes' appeal, in securing epistemological certainty, to 'a God who does not deceive' is very far from the recognition of dependence upon an other. To make the point Descartes' appeal might just as well be rendered, 'God does not interfere with the inherent reliability of my conceptual apparatus.' Rendered thus, it becomes clear that Descartes' position treats other minds as a threat rather than as an aid to learning. In this matter, at least, nothing changes with Kant. The introduction of 'God' as a 'necessary postulate' of practical reason merely utilises 'God' as a remote guarantor of truths which we, as individuals, discover for ourselves.

develop it out of himself and bring it to consciousness'.[10] Such confidence, however, Kierkegaard did not share.

What then, is the point of Kierkegaard's apparent isolation of the individual if it is not to emphasise the self-sufficiency of human beings in their efforts to know the Truth? The answer emerges when we recognise that there is really no such category as 'the individual' in Kierkegaard's work. It is rather 'the individual *before God* ' who is the focus of Kierkegaard's concern. Indeed Vernard Eller suggests that '*Den Enkelte* [that individual] is, for all intents and purposes, a synonym for 'a life in communion with God'.'[11] Added weight is given to Eller's claim by virtue of Kierkegaard's use of the category *Indesluttede* to describe one of the manifestations of sin. *Indesluttede* is not easily translated into English[12] but is well represented by Luther's phrase, *homo incurvatus in se*. *Indesluttede* thus describes the kind of individualism of which it is sometimes alleged Kierkegaard approves but careful attention to his work reveals that such individualism is regarded by him as sin.[13]

The primary employment of the category *Den Enkelte* occurs in the working out of Kierkegaard's ethical concerns but as we shall see further below, 'before God' ethical concerns are inseparably bound up with epistemological ones. The fundamental reason for this is that in knowing the Truth we are not concerned with knowing propositions but with participating in the new life Christ offers. Thus for Kierkegaard the highest realisation of what it is to be a self is to be a disciple. Kierkegaard's alleged individualism is precisely that which enables him to develop an ethics and an epistemology which is relational for only the individual can exist in relationship. In contrast, and this is why Kierkegaard battled so vehemently against the dominance of the crowd, it is precisely relationality which is destroyed by the collectivism deriving from Hegel.[14]

To be more specific about the epistemological ramifications of Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the individual it is necessary to recognise that there are certain kinds of truth which

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[10] *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press 1955) Vol. 2, p. 32. Cited by Niels Thulstrup in his 'Commentator's Introduction' to David Swenson's translation of *Philosophical Fragments,* p. 168.

[11] Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship,* p. 107.

[12] On which, see Mark Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship,* p. 286f.

[13] An excellent exposition of Kierkegaard's relational ontology is given by Elizabeth A. Morelli in her article, 'The Existence of the Self Before God in Kierkegaard's Sickness Unto Death' *Heythrop Journal* 36 (1995) 15-29.

[14] On which, see *Two Ages*. Gregor Malantschuk's comment upon Kierkegaard's relation to socialist thinkers of his time, particularly Marx and Proudhon, is again relevant here. See *The Controversial Kierkegaard,* p. 11 and also chapter five.

are not available to the public. In particular a great deal of the knowledge which arises from personal relationship is accessible only to those who participate in that relationship.[15] In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Climacus comments, 'A believer is infinitely interested in the actuality of another. For faith, this is decisive, and this interestedness is not just a little inquisitiveness but is absolute dependence upon the object of faith.' And further, 'The object of faith is the actuality of another person.'[16] Since Christianity is concerned, not with a doctrine but with a person who claims to be the Truth, it stands as the supreme example of the need for a relational epistemology, for an epistemology, in other words, which finds the condition for learning the Truth, not within the self, but in that which is given by God. Such an epistemology is provided for us in chapter one of *Philosophical Fragments.* What is being spelt out in those pages is nothing less than the logic of revelation. The Truth which God seeks to make known to human beings has the character of personal address and those who would learn of it must let go of their allegiance to an epistemology which trusts only in the deliverances of one's own intellect. Correspondingly they must admit the inadequacy of an epistemology whose propensity is always to be objective and learn to be attentive to the One who addresses us as subject. Kierkegaard's advice to readers of Scripture is apposite here:

> One makes God's Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine — instead of its being the voice of God that you shall hear... If you are to read God's Word in order to see yourself in the mirror, then during the reading you must incessantly say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking.[17]

The first alternative makes of God's Word an object at our disposal and we retain sovereignty over what shall be counted as knowledge. But the second way of reading is attentive to a Truth which is not of our own making and is characterised by trust in God.

The relational aspect of Christian conversion outlined above is the second feature distinguishing the transition from unbelief to faith from cognitive revolutions in other fields. It is again a feature which is constitutive of the New Testament concept of *metanoia.* Behm and Würthwein comment, 'Conversion as Jesus understands it... carries

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[15] H. A. Neilson has pointed out that Kierkegaard recognises precisely this difficulty with respect to New Testament scholarship which is bound to report only that which is available to the public. But the New Testament witness addresses itself to the individual with the question 'do you believe?' and the injunction to follow Jesus. There is a fundamental incommensurability about any approach to such personal challenges which seeks to circumvent the need for faith. See H. A. Neilson *Where the Passion Is: A Reading of Søren Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida 1983) p. 176f.

[16] *Postscript,* p. 325f.

[17] *For Self-Examination,* p. 39f.

with it the founding of a new personal relation of man to God...'[18] The transformation of our minds by which we are able to learn the Truth takes place, apparently, through personal relationship. According to Johannes Climacus, it is a relationship which 'the learner will never be able to forget, because in that very moment he would sink down into himself again, just as the person did who once possessed the condition and then, by forgetting that God is, sank into unfreedom.'[19] Relationship with the teacher, if we may speak thus of God, is no mere vanishing moment but, according to Climacus' (Christian) thought project, it is an essential condition for epistemic progress.

Jesus Christ

At the outset of *Philosophical Fragments* it was possible for Climacus to present this alternative way of learning the Truth as if it were merely a thought experiment. As the 'experiment' progressed, however, it became more difficult to conceal the fact that 'this idea did not arise in any human heart'. It arises, in fact, because of God's having acted to disclose the Truth to human beings in precisely the way which Climacus describes. There is an historical point of departure for the learner's understanding of the Truth. The locus of this disclosure, faith confesses, is Jesus Christ.

Here again we must make a critical distinction concerning the cognitive revolution which is Christian conversion. Although the adoption of Christian faith may in some respects be compared to a paradigm shift in science we must nevertheless be clear that the resolution of the 'absurdity' of the incarnation is not achieved by adopting a 'more adequate' paradigm into which Jesus Christ may then be accommodated.[20] The propensity of Christians throughout the ages to do just this is, as was noted in chapter three, the fundamental cause of all theological conflicts concerning the person of Jesus Christ. The opposite errors of Docetism and Ebionitism set the pattern for almost two thousand years of theological history in which prior definitions of 'God' and 'humanity' are used to interpret who Jesus is. Time and again the Church has needed to confess its faith that the eternal God is to be found in one who is our brother, against interpretations which, shaped by prior plausibility structures or paradigms, compromise either his divinity or his

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18 TDNT vol.4, p. 1003.

19 *Fragments*, p. 17.

20 In this regard Sylvia Walsh, commenting upon the Journal entry 6/6598, X^6 B 68 (1850), reminds us that 'faith is not a (higher) form of knowledge, for only the passion of faith, not a better or higher understanding of the absolute paradox is able to overcome the absurd.' 'Echoes of Absurdity: The Offended Consciousness and the Absolute Paradox in Kierkegaard's "Philosophical Fragments"' IKC 7, 33-46, p. 40.

humanity.[21]

The paradigm shift which takes place in Christian conversion is rather to be understood according to the example of Thomas for whom there comes a 'moment' when the one he had known as his brother is revealed to him as also his Lord and his God (John 20:28). In this moment of revelation and confession Thomas is transformed. He experiences *metanoia,* which is to say that his understanding of Jesus is no longer to be shaped by his prior categories nor constrained by a prior paradigm but his understanding of everything else is now to be shaped by this Jesus who is also his Lord. Through the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard himself speaks of Christ's life as the paradigm (*paradigmet*) and seeks to convey thereby, the stark contrast which exists between an authentic Christian understanding and the worldly wisdom which prevails in Christendom.[22]

The epistemic revolution involved in Christian conversion does not find for Jesus a place within a new paradigm but recognises him as the Truth which is constitutive of the paradigm called Christian faith. Biblically this is expressed by confessing Jesus to be the 'corner stone'. He is that upon which all else depends. He is the foundation of a whole new way of understanding the world and thus, as Steven Emmanuel explains, becomes the only basis upon which theology can proceed.

> To be committed to the Christian doctrinal frame, to which revelation is central, is to be committed to the claim that there is no human perspective higher than or superior to revelation in accordance with which it can be judged. It follows that to give up this commitment is to cease to be a Christian. Faith is not knowledge but obedience. To seek objective knowledge of the truth of revelation is therefore incompatible with the requirements of faith. The theologian thus refuses to give human reason primacy over the commitments of faith; he does not accept the philosopher's work as in any sense normative or definitive for his own regardless of how conclusive it may seem to be as a work of philosophy. The theologian is rather compelled to take his final norm from the Christ-revelation in which the true nature of God is revealed to man.[23]

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[21] A thorough discussion of this issue, with qualified approval of Kierkegaard's contribution to the debate, is provided by Colin Gunton in *Yesterday and Today.* While approving of Kierkegaard's attempt to confess together both the divinity and the humanity of Christ, Gunton expresses concern over Kierkegaard's apparent 'subjectivism'. There would be legitimate cause for concern if Kierkegaard's elevation of subjectivity entailed either relativism or fideism but I do not think that it does. On the matter of fideism I have already made comment in chapter three and on the question of relativism I shall have more to say in chapter eight below.

[22] *Practice in Christianity,* p. 107.

[23] Steven Emmanuel, 'The Logic of Christian Revelation in the Works of Søren Kierkegaard' (Ph.D Thesis, Brown University 1988) p. 176.

In accordance with this commitment it is in the acknowledged works — the explicitly Christian works — that Kierkegaard articulates a vision of the world as it is 'Christianly understood'. In signing the works with his own name Kierkegaard confesses that this is the position in which he too now stands.[24]

One concluding remark must be made which will also introduce our next section. Although I have spoken of faith in Jesus Christ giving rise to a new paradigm or world view, such a paradigm cannot be defined in terms of its resultant doctrines. The Christian world view is not defined as a sum of knowledge. Its only point of definition is the Truth which is Christ himself and to which Christians will seek to be attentive. Karl Barth expresses as much by insisting that theology can never simply build on what has already been established in its field but must return again and again to the Word of God.

The quest for an Archimedean point

That the paradigm of Christian faith is defined, not through the plotting of constitutive co-ordinates (which would amount to a system) but in terms of its orientation to and grounding in a single human life, that of Jesus of Nazareth, suggests that we may interpret Kierkegaard's quest for an 'Archimedean point' by which he might move the world as finding its fulfilment through faith in Christ. Indeed Kierkegaard's successive reflections on the subject covering a period of about twenty years reveal a development which culminates in the recognition that the individual's existence before God in faith is the only such point available.[25] The quest for an Archimedean point begins and is articulated in his journals from an early age. The first journal references occur in 1835 at which time the young Kierkegaard considers that the hermeneutical principle for understanding the world might be found in science. In admiration of scientists who appear to have found 'that point from which they have surveyed the whole and have seen the details in their proper light' Kierkegaard comments, 'one rarely finds tranquillity,

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[24] The works by Anti-Climacus are also meant to be explicitly Christian but are not signed by Kierkegaard because they express Christian faith to a degree which Kierkegaard himself has not yet attained. The point here is that faith is not mere intellectual assent. According to Kierkegaard, faith is authenticated ethically. He or she does not believe who only says 'Lord, Lord' and does not do the will of God. Kierkegaard's own signature to the works is omitted because Anti-Climacus makes loftier claims on behalf of Christian faith than Kierkegaard himself feels able to express existentially.

[25] Winfield E. Nagley, who is the only scholar to have given particular attention to Kierkegaard's quest for an Archimedean point, concludes that 'the Archimedean point was a metaphor for the religious life'. Nagley's exposition of this correct suggestion is limited however by his having available to him only the early Journal selections edited and published by Alexander Dru. See Winfield E. Nagley 'Kierkegaard's Archimedean Point' *Perspectives in Education, Religion and the Arts*, eds. Howard E. Kiefer and Milton K. Munitz (Albany: State University of New York Press 1970) 163-180.

harmony and joy such as theirs.'[26] At about the same time Kierkegaard experiences such tranquillity himself, not, however, through scientific discovery, but in solitary contemplation as he stands on the cliffs above the beach near Sortebro. In a beautiful piece of writing reminiscent of Psalm 8, Kierkegaard finds the Archimedean point in that moment in which one is simultaneously aware both of one's nothingness and one's greatness. Standing alone before the vast expanse of sky and sea, such a moment was prompted for Kierkegaard as he observed the sure flight of the birds and recalled Christ's words: 'Not a sparrow will fall to the earth without your heavenly Father's will.'[27]

The experience described was, however, momentary and soon afterwards we find Kierkegaard writing,

> What I really need is to get clear about *what I must do*, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that *I* shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me,* to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die.* ... This is what I needed to lead a *completely human life* and not merely one of *knowledge*, so that I could base the development of my thought not on — yes, not on something called objective — something which in any case is not my own, but on something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am, so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which I cling fast even though the whole world may collapse. *This is what I need, and this is what I strive for.*[28]

Despite the earlier experience above the beach at Sortebro the subsequent passage reveals that Kierkegaard's longing remains unfulfilled. In the course of the three journal entries, however, there is a distinct turn, in his quest for a point of reference, away from the scientific and toward the religious. Two further points of interest arise from the passage just quoted. Firstly, Kierkegaard's primary concern is with 'what I must do'. He is not concerned to survey the world *sub specie aeterni* but to participate in it. It is the latter rather than the former which constitutes a 'completely human life'. Secondly, however, Kierkegaard explicitly notes that what he requires is something upon which 'I can base the development of my thought'. Thought requires an orientation point. It cannot be detached. It cannot begin from nothing as Hegel would have it but must be grounded in that truth which is 'true for me.' Kierkegaard's concern may not, incidentally, be cited in support of a non-realist view of truth which holds things to be true by virtue of being

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[26] *Journals*, 5/5092, 1 A 72 (June 1, 1835).
[27] *Journals*, 5/5099, 1 A 68 (1835).
[28] *Journals*, 5/5100, 1 A 75 (August 1, 1835).

believed in. In the same journal entry Kierkegaard comments, 'I certainly do not deny that I still accept an *imperative* of knowledge and that through it men may be influenced, but *then it must come alive in me,* and *this* is what I now recognise as the most important of all.'

Two journal entries from 1839[29] indicate that Kierkegaard's quest has still not attained its end but in 1840, reflecting upon the death of his father, he writes, 'I learned from him what fatherly love is, and through this I gained a conception of divine fatherly love, the single unshakeable thing in life, the true Archimedean point.'[30] Here the religious character of the Archimedean point is maintained along with the newly acquired recognition that the decisive point of orientation for one's life may not be an idea so much as a relationship. This recognition becomes the salient feature of Kierkegaard's subsequent remarks on the matter.

In the meantime, however, two of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms advance their own estimations of what might serve as an Archimedean point. The 'Aesthete' in Part I of *Either/Or* considers that 'the artistically achieved identity is the Archimedean point'[31] while Judge William, champion of the ethical life, contends that 'when the personality is the absolute then it is itself the Archimedean point.'[32] Neither of these suggestions, however, can be accepted by Kierkegaard himself. Johannes Climacus draws much closer to Kierkegaard's own view in acknowledging that Lessing has found an Archimedean point in his awareness that 'he had infinitely to do with God, but nothing, nothing directly to do with any human being.'[33] Such awareness is a fundamental characteristic of the spiritual life and displaces concerns of only relative significance. So Kierkegaard writes,

> In the secular world the King is unconditionally the only one that is bound by a relationship of conscience. It is his preeminence that he alone is responsible only to God and his conscience. —

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29 *Journals,* 5/5378, II A 406 (1839) and 5/5410, II A 548 (1839).

30 *Journals,* 5/5468, III A 73 (1840).

31 *Either/Or,* I, p. 295.

32 *Either/Or,* II, p. 265.

33 *Postscript,* p. 65. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the denial of a *direct* relationship to any human being must be set in the context of Kierkegaard's later contention that 'worldly wisdom believes that love is a relationship between man and man; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between man-God-man, that is, that God is the middle term'. To love one's neighbour, in other words, is conceived by Kierkegaard to be first and foremost an expression of one's responsibility before God (*Works of Love,* p. 87). Indeed this is the only way in which it is proper to conceive of the duty to love one's neighbour as absolute. In contrast, an absolute responsibility owed directly by one human being to another may easily give rise to tyranny. The individual who is aware of his or her responsibility before God, however, undermines the tyrannical simply by confessing a higher authority.

> But in the spiritual world, how completely different.... A poor woman who weeds the gardens of the rich can say: 'I am doing this work for a dollar a day, but I do it very carefully for the sake of conscience.'...this phrase and this thought — *for the sake of conscience* — is a transformation of language, is the Archimedean point outside the world, and with this, when it is in deep inward silence before God, the weeder-woman can say that she moves heaven and earth.[34]

'Conscience', of course, derives from *cum scientia*. The weeder-woman's approach to her work, indeed to her whole life, is grounded in that *knowledge* which is to be had in relationship *with* God.[35] The content of that knowledge is precisely that one exists as a person before God. Kierkegaard comments elsewhere that 'it is the conscience which constitutes a personality; personality is an individual determination confirmed by being known by God in the possibility of conscience... God's shared knowledge [Guds Samviden] is the stabilization, the confirmation.'[36]

One's existence before God is further qualified by Kierkegaard as a 'deep inward silence before God'. Accordingly in 1848 we find him suggesting that, 'the Archimedean point outside the world is a prayer chamber where a true man of prayer prays in all honesty — and he will move the earth.'[37] More generally he writes, 'Faith is quite correctly 'the point outside the world' which therefore also moves the whole world'.[38] That which was expressed only tentatively in the early years of Kierkegaard's adult life is now affirmed with assurance; his participation in the life of faith, a life lived 'before God' is the fulcrum against which everything is changed. Faith, let us recall, is a gift which is given by God and is the sole condition for understanding the Truth. We must recall too, that for Kierkegaard faith is a relational category. The one who gives such a gift is no mere occasion, no vanishing moment but remains present as sustainer of the new life of faith. Whoever, having received the condition, forgets that God is 'sinks down into himself again', sinks again into 'unfreedom'.[39] Which God is referred to here? According to Johannes Climacus in the *Fragments,* the only God we can know is the one who has become human. The Archimedean point, it appears, is nothing other than relationship

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[34] *Journals,* 1/683, VIII[1] A 60 (1847).
[35] That Kierkegaard himself had in mind that conscience was the expression for the individual's co-knowledge with God is confirmed by Gregor Malantschuk in his editorial comment on 'conscience' in the *Journals* (Vol. 1 p. 521). In support of his view he cites Kierkegaard as follows: 'In paganism there is essentially no question of conscience. Socrates however, inaugurates something new by finding a spiritual principle within himself. Only the ethical as man's inner reality and the eternal in man constitute conscience. Then conscience expresses man's knowledge shared [samviden] with God. (Postscript p. 138.)'.
[36] *Journals,* 3/3214, VII[1] A 10 (1846).
[37] *Journals,* 3/3426, IX A 115 (1848).
[38] *Journals,* 3/2803, X[2] A 529 (1850).
[39] *Fragments,* p. 17.

with him. How does one find such a point? That is simply the question of the *Fragments:* 'How can I learn the Truth?' and the answer given there is that the Truth is received as a gift from God. The discovery, or more accurately the *disclosure* of the Archimedean point is synonymous with the 'new birth' by which the individual becomes a person of faith.[40]

After 1850 Kierkegaard makes only one further Journal entry on the subject. A superficial reading of this entry might suggest that Kierkegaard has departed from his earlier conception of the Archimedean point. He writes, 'Christianity wants to move existence at the most profound level. But for such a movement, as Archimedes has properly said, a point outside is needed. But the one and only point outside is martyrdom...'[41] That this should be read as confirmation of Kierkegaard's earlier comments on the matter rather than a departure from them requires some knowledge of what martyrdom means for Kierkegaard. In the closing years of his life Kierkegaard had become convinced that martyrdom was the one true sign of authentic Christian faith; 'To the same degree that you resemble him [Jesus Christ]', he writes, 'to the same degree you will suffer abuse.'[42] Or again: 'thus one sees that to be a Christian is a martyrdom, is to be sacrificed.... Humanly speaking, by being *before God* the religious man is abandoned to suffering every injury, injustice, degradation, and deception at the hands of the others who say 'Goodbye' to God and do not give him a thought.'[43] Thus Kierkegaard's last Journal entry on the subject of the Archimedean point, though undoubtedly shaped by an increasing sense of alienation from his contemporaries, nevertheless confirms his earlier recognition that only *before God* do we find that still point against which heaven and earth may truly be understood.

What have we learned from this survey of Kierkegaard's longing for an Archimedean point? In the first place our investigations have borne out the suggestion that for Kierkegaard, the quest for an Archimedean point is ultimately fulfilled through faith in Jesus Christ. It has also become apparent that in seeking an Archimedean point Kierkegaard's ultimate interest is existential rather than epistemological: 'What I really

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40 This conclusion is also drawn by Louis Reimer who contends that the 'new birth' by which the individual comes to faith is not merely the alteration of his or her ideas but indicates both an ontological transformation and a new standpoint *before God.* Reimer agrees that this standpoint is the Archimedean point referred to in the Journal entry of 1850. See 'Die Erlösung. Die Wiederholung der Ursprünglichkeit' *Some Main Concepts in Kierkegaard,* eds. Niels Thulstrup and Mariá Mikulova Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag 1988) 164-172, p. 167f.

41 *Journals,* 3/2665, XI^1 A 462 (1854).

42 *Journals,* 3/2643, IX A 325 (1848).

43 *Journals,* 3/2654, X^1 A 382 (1849).

need is to get clear about *what I must do*, not what I must know.' To this interest we must certainly return below. He is under no illusion however that acting can be divorced from knowing: 'knowledge', he says, 'must precede every act'. Accordingly, as noted above, the Archimedean point is something upon which 'I can base the development of my thought'. Faith in Jesus Christ thus becomes the point from which a new paradigm takes shape. Relationship with him is the ground of an entirely new cognitive framework.

If it is legitimate to interpret Kierkegaard's discussions of the Archimedean point in this way then a very important result follows. At the beginning of chapter five I noted a difference of opinion between Alastair McKinnon and Gregory Schufreider concerning the proper interpretation of Kierkegaard's remark that 'When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd'. McKinnon takes this remark to mean that for the believer 'all properly logical or conceptual conflicts [concerning the God-Man] can be resolved'. Schufreider, on the other hand, contends that 'we cannot conclude from this [remark] that faith comprehends the absurd, for if it did... "then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge"'. Both writers represent features of Kierkegaard's position which must be maintained. While Schufreider safeguards Kierkegaard's contention that faith is not a knowledge, McKinnon's emphasis is commensurate with the claim of *Philosophical Fragments* that faith is the means by which we may *learn* the Truth. Kierkegaard's deliberations upon the Archimedean point provide the means by which we may maintain both aspects of Kierkegaard's position for if faith in the God-Man, proclaimed by worldly wisdom to be an absurdity, is the Archimedean point from which a new cognitive paradigm takes shape then it follows as a corollary that such faith is not a knowledge. This is because that which is the ground of a cognitive paradigm cannot itself be an object of knowledge within it.[44] Only if the revelation of God in Christ is to be tested against the authority of a paradigm or hermeneutical framework imported from elsewhere could Jesus Christ be found as an object within it. The alternative is that Jesus Christ, through the condition which he himself bestows, becomes the ground of all our knowing and the criterion of Truth. This is the alternative presented to us by Johannes Climacus in the 'thought experiment' of *Philosophical Fragments*. Holding to the insights of both McKinnon and Schufreider then, faith is a relationship which is not itself an instance of knowledge but which nevertheless yields understanding.

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[44] McKinnon himself recognises this point in the article to which we have been referring. Kierkegaard, he writes, 'is insisting that any coherent understanding rests and must rest upon something which cannot itself be expressed in terms of that understanding. He is saying that any system of understanding rests ultimately upon something that cannot be understood in terms of that system; upon something which, as we have put it, is systematically incomprehensible.' 'Kierkegaard: "Paradox" and Irrationalism', p. 106.

We must consider whether the resolution I have proposed here is consistent with Climacus' own explicit comments on the matter. Attempting to differentiate between faith and knowledge, Climacus claims, 'It is easy to see, then... that faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is the historical.'[45] Within the paradigm from which Climacus speaks it is determined independently of Jesus Christ that the historical cannot be the locus of eternal truth. In the same context, however, Climacus contemplates the possibility that the paradox which is the object of faith 'specifically unites the contradictories, is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal'.[46] The implication is that only the 'uniting of the contradictories' in the event of the incarnation can be the basis for a new knowledge of the eternal and the historical alike. And thus it follows that the paradox of the incarnation, precisely because it is the foundation of such knowledge, cannot be found as an item within the new cognitive field. Jesus Christ is the foundation, the corner stone, who is apprehended as such, not as he is accommodated into a prior paradigm, but only through the divinely given transformation of our minds.

Contemporaneity

In Climacus' account of how one learns the Truth, faith in Jesus Christ is given the name of 'contemporaneity'.[47] Whoever undergoes the transformation which Climacus calls the 'new birth' becomes a contemporary of Jesus Christ in a way quite unlike the historical contemporary who does not see with the eyes of faith. The point of interest for this chapter is that according to Climacus the difference between a historical contemporary of Jesus and the believer who is a contemporary in faith is at least in part a matter of knowledge: 'Only the believer, i.e the non-immediate[48] contemporary, knows the

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45 *Fragments,* p. 62.
46 Ibid. p. 61.
47 The concept is also maintained by the Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus who writes, 'contemporaneity is the condition of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith.' *Practice in Christianity,* p. 9.
48 A word needs to be said at this point about Kierkegaard's nomenclature. He calls the contemporary's relationship to God the *second immediacy.* This is in contrast to the presumption of an immediate relationship to God either, in this instance, through the sensory experience of the eye-witness or otherwise through the rationalism of Hegel or the romanticism of Schleiermacher. In this regard Kierkegaard shows a dependence upon Kant who similarly denied the possibility of an immediate relation to ultimate reality either through sensory experience or pure reason. On Kierkegaard's indebtedness to Kant see Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1992), but compare Andrew J. Burgess' cautionary note that 'the similarities between the two thinkers merely highlight their basic divergence'. 'Forstand in the Swenson-Lowrie Correspondence and in the "Metaphysical Caprice"', p. 122.

Teacher, since he receives the condition from him, and therefore knows him even as he is known.'[49] Whoever knows and is known in this way is further qualified by Climacus as the contemporary *disciple.* To be contemporary with Jesus Christ is to follow him.[50] 'This', says Kierkegaard, 'is the decisive thought. This thought is the central thought of my life... Not that I have discovered it. God forbid that I should be guilty of such presumption. No, the discovery is an old one, it is that of the New Testament.'[51]

The epistemological result which confirms our attempts to describe the transition to Christian faith as a transformation of one's mind is that Jesus Christ, 'the god', in Climacean terminology, is given to be known only to those who have 'left their nets' and have begun to follow him on the way. He is expressly not known through the multitude of attempts to decide who he is through a detached and objective curiosity which is not prepared to leave the security of long-held plausibility structures, much less to become obedient to Christ's command. Faith, according to Climacus, is a mode of existence and only those who take the existential plunge, who venture out over the seventy thousand fathoms of water, are in any position to learn the Truth. Commenting on Kierkegaard's understanding of the Word of God, Johannes Sløk suggests that the defining mark of Christian existence is not the holding of particular opinions but obedience to the divine command.[52] Kierkegaard himself writes,

> If someone wanted to be his [Christ's] follower, his approach, as seen in the Gospel, was different from lecturing. To such a person he said something like this: Venture a decisive act; then we can begin. What does this mean? It means that one does not become a Christian by hearing something about Christianity, by reading something about it, by thinking about it, or, while Christ was living, by seeing him once in a while or by going and staring at him all day long. No, a *setting* (*situation*) is required — venture a decisive act; the proof does not precede but follows, is in and with the imitation that follows Christ.[53]

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[49] I have reproduced this passage from the Swenson translation of *Philosophical Fragments* (p.84) because in my opinion it reads much more clearly here than in the Hong translation (p. 68).

[50] The principal treatment of the concept of contemporaneity is found in *Practice in Christianity* where the emphasis is upon following Jesus in his lowliness. To follow him is not a matter of approving of some sanitised divine Christ but of committing oneself to the company of the one who is cast out and crucified. It is the Christ in lowliness and not the Christ in glory who invites us to follow him. On this see Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship,* pp. 356ff. The point is also made by Alastair McKinnon in 'Kierkegaard's Attack on Christendom: Its Lexical History' *Toronto Journal of Theology* 9.1 (1993) 95-106, p. 103.

[51] *Attack Upon Christendom,* p. 242.

[52] Johannes Sløk, 'Kierkegaard's Bestimmung des Begriffes "Gottes Wort"' *Orbis Litterarum* 10 (1955) 236-244, p. 236.

[53] *Judge for Yourself!,* p. 191. In the same vein Kierkegaard approvingly quotes Pascal who says, 'The reason it is so difficult to believe is that it is so difficult to obey'. Cited in *Journals,* 3/3103, VII[1] A 151 (1846).

It is for this reason that we suggested earlier that, at least in respect of Christian faith, ethics (the business of acting decisively) and epistemology cannot be separated. Learning the Truth cannot be reduced to a work of the intellect. It is not the preserve of reason or of imagination or of memory. Instead it is a way of life in the company of Jesus whose identity as the Truth is confirmed by those who have known his blessing along the way. Of course, in this process of learning through obedience, even the concept of Truth is redefined. As Jeremy Walker has put it, Truth is no longer to be conceived as 'a logical or epistemological relation, but [as] a way of being; indeed a person.'[54] Anti-Climacus explains that,

> Christ is the truth in the sense that to *be* the truth is the only true explanation of what truth is. Therefore one can ask an apostle, one can ask a Christian, 'What is truth?' and in answer to the question the apostle and this Christian will point to Christ and say: Look at him, learn from him, he was the truth. This means that truth in the sense that Christ was the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc., but a life.... And this is why it becomes untruth when knowing the truth is separated from being the truth or when knowing the truth is made identical with being it, since it is related the other way.[55]

To what extent this distinguishes Christian conversion from paradigm shifts in other fields is not of primary concern. The main point is that faith is a mode of existence which, far from presupposing an understanding of the Truth, is that which makes understanding possible. It is perhaps possible in science to undertake a 'thought-experiment', to accept a paradigm for the sake of argument, but to propose such a thing in respect of Christian faith is either a serious misunderstanding of faith or it is an ironical ploy, designed to demonstrate the misunderstanding to a speculative and dispassionate age.

While the concept of a paradigm shift in science entails no particular connection between existential and epistemological transformation, the New Testament concept of *metanoia* leaves no such ambiguity. Behm and Würthwein comment, 'metanoia, related to the will of God which he proclaims, is the way of salvation indicated by Jesus. It is a way which must be taken, not the theoretical description of a way.'[56] The comment echoes Kierkegaard's insistence that Christian faith is characterised not by assent to a doctrine

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54 Jeremy Walker, 'Communication and Community' *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Wilfred Laurier University Press 1982) 56-70, p. 59.
55 *Practice in Christianity*, p. 205.
56 TDNT vol. 4, p.1002.

but by obedience. It is in this way that the Truth which is incarnate in Jesus may be learned.

Sobriety and drunkenness

Perhaps the most prominent theme in the Kierkegaardian corpus is that the obedience of faith and the Truth which faith proclaims are not approved of in this world. 'Act just once', says Kierkegaard, 'in such a manner that your action expresses that you fear God alone and man not at all — you will immediately in some measure cause a scandal.'[57] Climacus, we have seen, gives voice to the world's outrage. The incarnation is a paradox, an absurdity, an offense, and those who believe it, who act as if it were true, are foolish and insane. But there is an irony in these pseudonymous barbs for their purpose is to beg the question: who is mad after all? While Climacus leaves the reader to decide, Kierkegaard himself is more direct. In *Judge for Yourself!*, his last publication before the 'attack literature' Kierkegaard adduces the contrast set forth in I Peter between sobriety and drunkenness to suggest that it is the Christian who sees and understands the truth while the wisdom of the world clouds and distorts the truth. With consummate wit Kierkegaard has someone of 'secular mentality' drunkenly proclaim, 'I stick to facts. I am neither a fanatic nor a dreamer nor a fool; I believe nothing, nothing whatever, except what I can touch and feel; and I believe no one, not my own child, not my wife, not my best friend; I believe only what can be demonstrated — because I stick to facts...'[58] The soliloquy continues becoming ever more repetitive and ridiculous until finally in a drunken stupor the speaker admits, 'The only thing, I suppose, that would momentarily disturb me would be if someone had the notion to say that I was drunk, intoxicated — I, the coldest and calmest and clearest common sense.'[59]

The drunk's principles, of course, are the maxims of rationalism: Believe nothing, stick to facts, trust no one, insist on demonstration... Is this not a kind of madness? Even if it could be done, and Kierkegaard thinks it impossible, would adherence to such principles not constitute an impoverished and ultimately inhuman existence? To whoever believes it possible, 'the apostle says, 'Become sober!' — and says thereby: You are intoxicated; unhappy one, if you could see yourself, you would shudder, because you would see that you are like an intoxicated man when he — disgusting! — scarcely resembles a human being.'[60]

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57 *Journals*, 3/3679, X^3 A 225 (1850).
58 *Judge for Yourself!*, p. 97.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.

To such a one as this the apostle proclaims the need for conversion. More particularly the apostle bears witness to Jesus Christ who instead of offense invites belief, instead of suspicion invites trust, instead of the non-committal demand for facts invites the decisive act: 'follow me!'. What is needed, in other words, is faith, for this is the decisive condition by which we may learn the Truth. Thus it is that Kierkegaard claims that in Christianity,

> the entire relation in the distinction, spiritually understood, between being sober and being intoxicated is turned around.... Christianity makes everything new.... just as the apostles, on Pentecost Day, were never more sober than when, in defiance of probability, they were simply instruments for God — what Christian sobriety.[61]

In contrast too with an estimation of clear headed understanding as detached and objective, Christianity insists that 'the only person who is completely sober is the person whose understanding is action'.[62] Kierkegaard here reiterates the point that has been made above; a transformed understanding of who Jesus is manifests itself in obedience. We do not understand him as Lord unless we follow him. This accords again with the New Testament concept of *metanoia* which 'must be demonstrated in the totality of a corresponding life... a life of love and righteousness in accordance with the will of God.'[63]

The contrast between sobriety and drunkenness is advanced by Kierkegaard as a metaphor of the contrast between the Christian and the secular or the 'purely human' view. Without ignoring the ethical manifestations of this contrast our purpose within this chapter has been to elucidate the cognitive transformation which takes place in Christian conversion. Essentially, Kierkegaard's complaint against the secular mentality is that it trusts too much in human epistemic capacity. Like the drunk who insists on 'sticking to facts', on 'believing nothing' and on 'trusting no one' an epistemology which disdains the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ improperly delimits the Truth which is given to be known. More familiarly such disdain is known as sin. It is a 'sickness unto death' for which the cure is not Socratic recollection but faith.

'Omvendelse'

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61 Ibid. p. 103.
62 Ibid. p. 120.
63 TDNT vol 4, p. 1001.

In the foregoing discussion I have attempted to outline the characteristics of Christian conversion as presented in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. The transition from unbelief to faith in the God-Man bears, I have argued, in agreement with Ferreira, Evans, McKinnon and others, some resemblance to cognitive revolutions in other fields. In particular we have agreed that some forms of cognitive progress, including that of Christian conversion, are contingent upon a radical shift in basic assumptions and the reorientation of our thinking to a previously anomalous or implausible reality. In addition to the resemblances however, I have also noted some points of difference, the safeguarding of which I have vested in the New Testament concept of *metanoia*. I wish now to consider the use that Kierkegaard himself makes of this concept.

The Greek term metanoia, it must be acknowledged, does not appear anywhere in Kierkegaard's published works. Nor is there any occurrence of the term in the *Journals.*[64] At the heart of the thought experiment in *Philosophical Fragments,* however, while discussing the transformation which the learner undergoes as a result of receiving the condition, Climacus says, 'Let us call this change *conversion* [Omvendelse], even though this is a word hitherto unused; but we choose it precisely in order to avoid confusion, for it seems to be created for the very change of which we speak.'[65] *Omvendelse* or its cognates is the Danish word used to translate μετανοια or μετανοεω on fifty one of the fifty four occurrences of the two Greek words in the New Testament.[66] Despite 'seeming to be created for the very change of which we speak' *omvende* is a rather common expression and is used frequently by Kierkegaard, in the other works if not in *Philosophical Fragments*. Meaning literally to 'turn around' the English translators of Kierkegaard's works variously render it as 'transform', 'change', 'convert', 'turn', 'invert' and 'repent'. These multiple common occurrences indicate that Kierkegaard made no attempt to reserve the concept of *omvendelse* for a specifically Christian use. Nor does he usually intend by its use to speak of the transformation of our minds. All I argue, therefore, is that in carefully selecting the word *omvendelse* to describe the change which the learner undergoes in order to learn the Truth (*Fragments* p.18), Climacus aligns himself precisely with the New Testament concept of *metanoia.* That such alignment is deliberate is indicated, I think, by Climacus' eagerness in his 'thought experiment' to draw as many New Testament parallels as possible.

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64 In making this observation I am indebted to Alastair McKinnon for his assistance in executing computer searches of Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker* and *Papirer.*

65 *Fragments,* p. 18. (*Samlede Værker* Bd.IV, p. 188.)

66 The remaining three uses of μετανοεω are rendered in Danish as '*anger*' the equivalent of the English word 'repentance'. Source: *Ordbog Til Det Nye Testamente* (København: P. Hasse og Søn 1955).

Furthermore, Kierkegaard himself seems to indicate an awareness of the Greek term when he has Anti-Climacus speak of a person's mind being 'Christianly transformed' [*Omvendt*].[67]

It would undoubtedly be too much to argue that *Philosophical Fragments* is a conscious explication of the New Testament concept of *metanoia.* That, however, is not the case I am making. I rather contend that Kierkegaard's account of Christian conversion is consistent with the understanding of conversion which is portrayed in the New Testament and that the concept of *metanoia,* a constitutive part of that New Testament understanding, helpfully elucidates what Climacus means when he suggests that through faith we may learn the Truth.

Understanding through conversion

In examining those aspects of Kierkegaard's work which illuminate his understanding of Christian conversion this chapter has necessarily followed a number of differing strands of his thought. It has been proposed that the Kierkegaardian categories of sin, the individual before God, the God-Man, the Archimedean point, contemporaneity and sobriety helpfully explicate the transition from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. It will be useful now to draw the various strands together before considering one final aspect of the case.

Let us suppose, we have heard Climacus say, that the Socratic account of how one learns the Truth is itself untrue. If this be the case then we shall have to assume that human beings do not exist in the truth but rather in untruth. Such existence, Climacus decides to call sin. The effect of sin is not simply that we are prone to error but also that we are rendered incapable of learning the Truth. Our need is not of a maieutic teacher in the Socratic mode but of a Saviour who may impart to us that condition which will again enable us to learn. We have seen that Climacus' contention that epistemic progress depends decisively, not on our own intellectual or imaginative resources but upon the agency of another, runs counter to the individualistic epistemological tradition of western thought. While for Climacus, as also for Kierkegaard himself, learning the Truth is a matter for the individual rather than the crowd it is not the isolated and self-sufficient individual but the individual before God who is enabled to see and to understand the Truth.

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67 *Practice in Christianity,* p. 185.

The question arises: how is it possible for the individual to exist before God. The Christian answer is that God in the vulnerability of love has made himself available to us in Jesus Christ. The God-Man has become the servant of our need for salvation, for deliverance and for reconciliation. Our hand, however, is not forced for we may take offense at the suggestion that God has become our servant. We may despise his lowliness and flee from the help he offers. Or we may have faith. In this latter case we shall become contemporaries of Christ sharing with him in 'new life' and following him in obedience and trust. This relationship constitutes, for Kierkegaard, an Archimedean point. It is the basis of an entirely new understanding of the world, a new point of departure for all our thought. Far from having to accommodate and make sense of the God-Man within prior plausibility structures or paradigms, Jesus Christ becomes 'the foundation of one's noetic structure'.[68] What takes place here is metanoia, the transformation of our minds through salvific engagement with the Truth. And what is afforded through this process may be described metaphorically as sobriety. Faith in Jesus Christ, Kierkegaard claims, affords a better purchase on reality than our intoxication with reason which insists on detachment, objectivity and the suspension of all belief.[69]

That one must embark upon the life of faith in order to learn the Truth which is found in Jesus Christ is likely to provoke the objection that it is impossible to trust absolutely in that which one does not know to be absolutely trustworthy. Kierkegaard responds with the familiar metaphor by which the situation is compared to someone who wants to learn to swim but who will not venture out into the water. Venture the decisive act or remain on the shore. Kierkegaard does not deny, indeed his very point is, that the choice is yours.[70] Nothing is claimed here for Christian epistemology which is not the case for every epistemology, i.e., trusting oneself to any knowing process always involves an act of

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[68] The phrase is borrowed from Louis Pojman who is nevertheless wrong in suggesting that 'the idea of the incarnation' is put at the foundation of one's noetic structure. It is not an idea (a doctrine?) but the *relationship of faith in Christ* which constitutes the new foundation for thought. See Louis Pojman, 'Kierkegaard on Faith and History' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982) 57-68, p. 65.

[69] Kierkegaard is of course aware that it requires just as much faith to believe in the omnicompetence of reason as to place one's trust elsewhere. He frequently mocks Hegel for expecting people to believe that the system explains everything without actually having completed such explanations. See for example, *Postscript,* p. 106f., especially the discussion surrounding the comment, 'System and conclusiveness are just about one and the same, so that if the system is not finished, there is not any system.' p. 107.

[70] While Kierkegaard's position has been compared to Thomas Kuhn's identification of the need for conversion and faith in order for there to be cognitive progress in science, there is also the potential for fruitful comparison with the work of Michael Polanyi. Polanyi contends that all human knowing is constrained and made possible by fiduciary frameworks and advocates a return to the Augustinian principle of *nisi creditiritis, non intelligitis.* See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962) The discussion of Augustine's principle is found on pp. 266f.

faith.[71]

Is faith a leap?

It is commonly assumed to be a hallmark of Kierkegaard's religious thought that Christian faith involves a leap [*Spring*], an act of will which circumvents those objections to faith which are posed by human understanding. Because, however, the category of the leap is widely misunderstood, the assumption is one which I hesitate to assent to. While it is certainly the case that Kierkegaard makes considerable use of the category, taking it over from Lessing and perhaps also from Kant[72], the leap does not, as is often supposed, exhaustively account for the transition to Christian faith. Rather the category of leap draws attention to two closely related aspects of that transition without touching at all upon 'the condition' which is the critical feature of Christian conversion.[73]

The first such aspect is indicated by Stephen Evans who comments, 'the leap is simply Climacus' metaphorical way of emphasizing that the decision to become a Christian is a choice, a free personal decision'.[74] Although, in order to indicate that the leap is not sufficient on its own, I would prefer to say that the decision to become a Christian *involves* a choice rather than *is* a choice, Evans is nevertheless correct in suggesting that the leap functions as an indicator both of the contingency of conversion and of individual responsibility. The leap is, Climacus suggests, *meine Zuthat.*[75] It is that which the individual contributes to the process of conversion. But what precisely is this contribution? As we have already seen, Climacus claims that it is the 'letting go' of the understanding. More specifically it is the letting go of attempts to demonstrate the existence of God and especially the existence of God in the form of a servant. The leap then, the contribution which the individual makes, far from being the sufficient cause of conversion is more aptly defined as the removal of an obstacle to conversion. That obstacle is human pretence — the pretence that reason or the understanding enables us to attain the Truth on our own. Through the metaphor of the leap Climacus emphasises that

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[71] The unfinished work, *Johannes Climacus* or *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est,* makes exactly this point when it chronicles a young philosopher's inability to conquer his doubt that philosophy must begin with doubt.

[72] The debt to Lessing is immediately apparent in Climacus' discussion of the leap in the *Postscript* (especially pp. 93-106). For his indebtedness to Kant in this matter see again Ronald M. Green, 'Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* : A Kantian Commentary' IKC 7, p. 183f.

[73] That the category of the leap has often been transformed into a misleading caricature of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith is a view shared by David Wisdo who comments that scholars have tended to reify the suggestion that faith involves a leap. See his article, 'Kierkegaard on belief, faith and explanation'.

[74] Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 274.

[75] *Fragments,* p. 43. Cf *Journals,* 3/2345, V C 1 (1844).

it is incumbent upon every individual who would learn the Truth to abandon that intellectual path which is falsely presumed to be the way. But this tells us very little about the way which is proposed instead.

The second aspect of the transition to faith which the metaphor of the leap serves to elucidate is the radical discontinuity between human ways of knowing and the Truth which faith claims is to be apprehended in Jesus Christ. This discontinuity or gulf is stressed by Lessing and proves for him to be insurmountable. Kant too, employs the metaphor in order to draw attention to an epistemological hiatus, namely the illegitimate cognitive leap involved in cosmological 'proofs' for the existence of God.[76] In like manner the leap in the writings of Johannes Climacus indicates that there is no logical route from unbelief to faith. Those who would seek a rational basis for belief in the incarnation are confronted with a chasm which rationality cannot overcome. Hegel's grand attempt to mediate the 'merely apparent' impasse between human rationality and the revelation of God in Christ managed only to render irrelevant the historical particularity of Jesus and therefore not to reconcile the two at all. Climacus, in contrast seeks to recognise 'the *qualitative* transition of the leap from unbeliever to believer'.[77] Thus the second aspect of the leap directs attention to the epistemological discontinuity between unbelief and faith and, like the first aspect, does not imply that the leap is the decisive condition of a transition between the two.

The need of something else is, of course, the persistent claim of Johannes Climacus who in the *Postscript* acknowledges that in the moment of decision or in making *the leap,* as Climacus calls it in the same passage, 'the individual needs divine assistance'.[78] To speak of the leap as though it were something that the individual is to do alone, as for example in Walter Sikes' claim that the leap 'is not caused by anything external to the individual himself but solely by his own inward choosing'[79] is completely to misconstrue Climacus' intent. For as we have already seen, the transition to Christian faith, from beginning to end, depends crucially, not upon what we do but upon the condition which is given us by God. I suggested in chapter one that the Climacean account of the

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[76] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone,* trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row 1960) p. 59n. Kant writes, 'between the relation of a schema to its concept and the relation of this same schema of a concept to the objective fact itself there is no analogy, but rather a mighty chasm, the overleaping of which [*ein gewaltiger Sprung*] (μεταβασις εις αλλο γενος) leads at once to anthropomorphism.'

[77] *Postscript,* p. 12 (My italics). The contrast between the leap and Hegelian mediation is also made explicit in *Fear and Trembling,* p. 42n.

[78] *Postscript,* p. 258.

[79] Walter Sikes, *On Becoming the Truth*, p. 18.

transition to Christian faith would be well served by an explicit pneumatology but defended its absence in *Philosophical Fragments* by suggesting that the task of elucidating the logical distinction between the Socratic and the Christian approaches to learning the Truth is achieved by recognising that the condition for learning the Truth is a gift which is given by God. The logic of the matter did not require to be made more explicit by identifying, as the New Testament does, the role of the Holy Spirit in the giving of this gift. Commensurate, however, with Kierkegaard's claim that the transition is fully understood only in retrospect, the pneumatological elucidation of conversion is eventually provided by the Christian author, Kierkegaard himself. This he does in the third discourse of *For Self-Examination* entitled, 'It is the Spirit Who Gives Life'.[80]

The Spirit gives life

The theme of Kierkegaard's discourse on the Holy Spirit can be expressed very simply: To be a Christian is to die to the world but then, by the power of the Spirit, to receive new life. The pattern of death and rebirth which is outlined here is precisely that which Johannes Climacus has explicated in *Philosophical Fragments*. Conversion takes place, we have learned, as the individual, enabled by the gift of 'the condition', lets go of the understanding, wills the downfall of that in which he or she had previously trusted, takes leave of the former state and is brought to new life by God. Christianly understood, this work of transformation is enabled by the Holy Spirit. In a number of Journal entries on the matter Kierkegaard favours the title of 'Comforter' for the Spirit and points particularly to the Spirit's role through the pain of 'dying to the world' and in the midst of that suffering which inevitably ensues for those who are followers of Jesus. In Kierkegaard's own words, 'the Spirit is the Comforter. It is not only vitalizing, enabling power for 'dying to the world' — but is also the Comforter in relation to 'imitation'.[81]

The importance of both roles notwithstanding, our particular interest is in the agency of the Spirit in conversion. In this regard Kierkegaard places great emphasis upon the discontinuity between the old life and the new. Conversion is a qualitative transition —

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[80] Remarkably few commentators have recognised the critical role the Spirit plays in Kierkegaard's account of Christian conversion. Notable execeptions are Paul Sponheim in *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence* (London: SCM Press 1968), Vernard Eller in *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship,* and Reidar Thomte who correctly observes that for Kierkegaard, 'the transition to Christianity is expressed in the sentence, "It is the Spirit which giveth life"'. *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1948) p. 170. Climacus' frequent refrain that the idea of the incarnation 'does not arise in any human heart' also alerts us to the need of the Holy Spirit for the phrase is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9 and is followed by Paul's counsel that 'these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.' Kierkegaard would certainly have been aware of the Pauline explanation.
[81] *Journals,* 1/1919, X^5 A 44 (1852).

not merely a reformation but a transformation, and precisely for this reason Climacus insisted that 'no human being is capable of doing this; if it is to take place, it must be done by the god himself'.[82] So in *For Self-Examination,* Kierkegaard writes,

> This life-giving in the Spirit is not a *direct* heightening of the natural life in a person in *immediate* continuation from and connection with it — what blasphemy! how horrible to take Christianity in vain in this way! — it is a new life. A new life, yes, and this is no platitude as, for example, when we use this phrase about this and that every time something new begins to stir in us — no, it is a new life, literally a new life — because, mark this well, death goes in between, dying to, and a life on the other side of death — yes, that is a new life.[83]

The passage is reminiscent in some respects of the characteristics of a paradigm shift which we investigated earlier. The epistemic advance which is represented by a paradigm shift is not a 'direct heightening' of the previous thought structure nor is it 'an immediate continuation from and connection with it'. For paradigm shifts in science too, 'death goes in between'; allegiance to the old must be severed in order to make way for the new. What we have been arguing, in dependence upon the work of Søren Kierkegaard, is that this logic serves Christian epistemology too.

Clearly the radical 'newness' of any new paradigm — in the Christian case an incarnational one — means that no warrant can be provided for such a conversion. That is to say, no demonstration of its plausibility is available. On the contrary, the new claims are viewed as absurd and paradoxical. They are an offense to the prevailing structures of thought. Acceptance of them, in science or in theology, is always a matter of faith. And so we find Climacus insisting that faith is the condition which makes new understanding possible. Whereas, however, the agnostic Climacus had been able to identify the giver of faith only rather vaguely as 'the god', the Christian author of *For Self-Examination* is able to say that it is 'the Spirit [who] brings *faith.*'[84]

With this brief study of Kierkegaard's pneumatology one hopes to have refuted J. Sperna Weiland's claim that 'after earnestly reading Kierkegaard's works one cannot escape the conclusion that not a trace of a trinitarian belief in God is to be found in them. With this it is said at the same time that it is impossible for Kierkegaard to put the question after the 'dynamis' and the 'energy' of the transition to Christianity in the right way.'[85] The

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82 *Fragments,* p. 14f.
83 *For Self-Examination,* p. 76.
84 Ibid. p. 81.
85 J. Sperna Weiland *Humanitas Christianitas* (Te Assen Bij: Van Gorcum 1951) p. 138. I owe the

widespread neglect of Kierkegaard's understanding of the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly responsible for a propensity among some scholars to seek for the 'dynamis' of conversion elsewhere.[86]

The activity of the eternal God who comes among us in the form of a servant, overcomes the separation that has been wrought by sin, brings us to new life and sustains us in that life has, in Christian theology, been given the name of grace. It is important to note that grace does not refer to some power which is imputed to human beings, thus rendering them capable of achieving salvation themselves. On the contrary, grace denotes the dynamic of God's being for us and it is precisely this event which constitutes the radical distinction between Christianity and the Socratic. So in his *Journals* Kierkegaard was able to say,

> There is an infinitely radical, qualitative difference between God and man. This means, or the expression for this is: the human person achieves absolutely nothing; it is God who gives everything; it is he who brings forth a person's faith etc. This is grace and this is Christianity's major premise.[87]

What we have sought to do in this study, following the lead of *Philosophical Fragments*, is to trace the epistemological ramifications of this major Christian premise. The premise itself is not, of course, self-evident. That is why Climacus can propose it only in the guise of a thought-experiment. That, however, is an ironical ploy for Climacus readily admits, along with Kierkegaard himself, that 'it is God who gives everything'. God's acting toward us in this way is not a thought which 'arises in any human heart' but is given to be known in the very same moment in which it takes place. It is as a consequence of this event, rather than in advance of it, that we can say with Climacus that, 'no philosophy (for it is only for thought), no mythology (for it is only for the imagination), no historical knowledge (which is for memory) has ever had this idea...'[88]. Kierkegaard himself concludes, 'There is only one proof for the truth of Christianity — the inward proof, *argumentum spiritus sancti*.'[89]

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reference to Paul Sponheim, *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence*, p. 206.

86 Louis Pojman's persistent allegations against Kierkegaard of volitionism and M. Jamie Ferreira's treatise on the power of imagination are cases in point.

87 *Journals*, 2/1383, X^1 A 59 (1849).

88 *Fragments*, p. 109.

89 *Journals*, 3/3608, X^1 A 481 (1849).

7

A SECOND CHRISTIANITY?

Through a study in the preceding chapters of Søren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* we have attempted to elucidate Kierkegaard's Climacean proposal that the 'what' of Christian faith, the salvific self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, cannot be understood except under the condition of the individual's being transformed by that event itself. In the matter of faith in the God-Man, Climacus contends, the 'how' and the 'what' are given together. That is to say, the event of revelation is epistemologically transformative; the 'teacher' gives not only the Truth, but also provides the learner with the condition for understanding it. The need for such a condition, claims Climacus, is engendered by the epistemological ramifications of human sinfulness and without the salvific transformation thus proposed, the 'what' of Christian faith appears implausible, paradoxical, even absurd. Given this account of the logic of Christian conversion, my purpose in this chapter is simply to invite Kierkegaard to join a conversation among theologians of the twentieth century who are increasingly hostile to the traditional content of Christian faith.[1]

The content of Christian faith must, of course, have something to do with Jesus of Nazareth, with the one who has been called the Christ. On the face of it at least, Christians are those who confess that in Jesus Christ the nature and purpose of God is disclosed to humankind. Doctrinally, this disclosure of God in Jesus has been expressed by speaking of Jesus as God Incarnate. The second person of the Trinity, it is said, has come among us, is participant in our lives so that we may share in the life of God. The only truly ecumenical creed of the worldwide Church, the Nicene Creed, speaks of Jesus Christ as *homoousios to patri*, of one being with the Father. And it means to speak, not merely symbolically, as though Jesus were somehow a sign of God for us, but literally,

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[1] I am well aware that the principal theologian I propose to discuss in this chapter sometimes denies that any such thing as 'the traditional content of Christian faith' exists. See John Hick, 'Is There a Doctrine of the Incarnation?' in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued,* ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1979) 47-50. I simply think that Hick is wrong and demonstrably so. It would be tiresome to provide such a demonstration here but refer the reader instead to Basil Mitchell's refutation of Hick in the same volume: 'A Summing Up of the Colloquy: Myth of God Debate' 233-240, p. 236. One might also ask about Hick's own commitment to such a claim when in the Preface to a more recent book he writes, 'The traditional Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth is that he was God Incarnate...' and so on. *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press 1993) p. ix. This book will henceforth be cited as *The Metaphor.*

which is to say that in encountering Jesus we are addressed by God himself. To confess the creed of the Christian church is to claim that the one who has given us life now comes among us in order to share it.

This, I would contend, is the traditional Christian position but as we have noted, there are increasing numbers of theologians who insist that it is naive to speak of Jesus in this way. The doctrine of the incarnation, they say, is in need of revision. It must be updated and brought into line with what we now know of the world. Christianity must change its shape in order to win acceptance in a world which has outgrown the allegedly primitive mentality of earlier times. In his preface to a collection of essays published in 1977, John Hick wrote, 'human knowledge continues to grow at an increasing rate, and the pressure upon Christianity is as strong as ever to go on adapting itself into something which can be believed — believed by honest and thoughtful people who are deeply attracted by the figure of Jesus and by the light which his teaching throws upon the meaning of human life.'[2] The several authors who contributed to the book from which I have quoted are agreed, according to Hick, that Jesus should be recognised '(as he is presented in Acts 2:21) as 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us.'[3] The 'pressure upon Christianity to adapt itself into something that can be believed' is thus welcomed by Hick and his colleagues as forcing the Christian church to an ever more accurate understanding of who Jesus is. Our consideration of the work of Søren Kierkegaard gives cause for doubt whether increasing the plausibility of the Christian story, or any story for that matter, is tantamount to drawing nearer to the truth but such doubts do not appear to have troubled Hick and his fellow authors. We, however, shall have occasion to return to the point later in this chapter.

The collection of essays I have been referring to appeared, of course, under the title, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977).[4] It is a book and a title which has fired the imagination of a great many Christians around the world and has contributed significantly to a widespread abandonment among church-goers of the traditional doctrine of the incarnation. In the eighteen years of debate since the book's first appearance John Hick has continued to be one of the leading protagonists of the position which the original

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[2] John Hick, 'Preface' in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press 1977) p. ix. (This volume will henceforth be cited as *The Myth.*) The quotation from Hick makes approving use of the observation by T. S. Eliot that 'Christianity is always adapting itself into something that can be believed'.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Edited by John Hick (London: SCM Press)

publication espoused. Although we shall have cause to refer to various publications of Hick and his interlocutors, for the purposes of this chapter we shall orient our discussion around the most recent of Hick's published contributions to the debate, namely, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993). During the sixteen years which have elapsed between this and the earlier publication there has been little change to Hick's basic position[5] but, in an effort to meet the objections of critics, some restatement of the case has been attempted.

The principal thesis of *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* may be stated very simply. Hick contends that the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate is no longer tenable and in consequence an alternative statement of Christian faith must be found. In defence of this thesis Hick argues,

> (1) that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him; (2) that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way; (3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils; (4) that the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal... (5) that we can rightly take Jesus... as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence; and (6) that a non-traditional Christianity based upon this understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God, and can better serve the development of a world community and world peace than a Christianity which continues to see itself as the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible for human beings.[6]

It shall be my purpose in what follows to bring the insights of Kierkegaard to bear upon the arguments here set out. Because they lie beyond the concerns expressed in *Philosophical Fragments,* however, I shall not, in this chapter, attempt to engage with arguments (3) and (6) but will return to them in two appendices at the conclusion of this work. Our concern in the meantime will be with the four remaining arguments for which a Climacean counter may be adduced. We shall begin with an examination of Hick's contention that theology has been unable to offer a coherent explication of what it means by affirming the co-presence in Jesus of the divine and the human (Argument 2). Following this we will proceed to consider Hick's claim that close examination of the

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5 Hick's propensity during this period for repeated publication of the same material is witness to the maintenance of his views.
6 *The Metaphor,* p. ix.

historical evidence does not warrant belief in the incarnation (1), his proposal that the doctrine ought to be regarded as a metaphorical way of speaking of Jesus' significance for us (4), and finally the soteriological implications of Hick's concept of lordship (5). A more general consideration of the distinctions between Hick and Kierkegaard will conclude the chapter.

The unintelligibility of the incarnation

Both in the 1977 publication and again in 1993 Hick has proffered the argument that the incarnation has been rendered unbelievable by its sheer unintelligibility.[7] In 1977 he wrote that, 'to say, without explanation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square'.[8] In 1993, admitting that this claim had given rise to some misinterpretation, he explains that 'if the doctrine of the incarnation is to be shown to have a believable meaning this must be intelligibly spelled out', and further, 'I was not, however, suggesting that the idea of divine incarnation can be dismissed *a priori,* without looking at the attempts to explicate it'.[9] Hick's qualifications notwithstanding, the original statement does imply that common understandings of divinity and humanity preclude the possibility of any immediate intelligibility in the claim that humanity and divinity are given together in Jesus Christ. Hick concedes that a modification of such understandings may lend intelligibility to the doctrine of incarnation but rather goes back on this concession when he again insists that 'In the history of the church a large number of theories have been offered to explain in what sense Jesus was both divine and human; but in the past they have had to be rejected as violating the *accepted understanding* either of deity or humanity' (my italics).[10] The appeal to an 'accepted understanding' surely marks a return to concepts of God and of humanity formed in advance of engagement with Jesus Christ.

Two comments are warranted before we proceed to consider Hick's objections in more detail. On the face of it, first of all, the doctrine of the incarnation is a paradox. It is an

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[7] The claim has been repeated in numerous of Hick's publications. See, for example, 'Is there a Doctrine of the Incarnation?', *The Second Christianity* (London: SCM Press 1983) p. 32, and 'Trinity and Incarnation in the Light of Religious Pluralism' in *Three Faiths — One God,* eds. John Hick and Edmund S. Meltzer (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan 1989) 197-210, p. 203.

[8] *The Myth,* p. 178.

[9] *The Metaphor,* p. 3.

[10] *The Metaphor,* p. 4. Hick does not appear to consider the possibility that some formulations of the doctrine of incarnation have been rejected, not because of their violation of accepted understandings of deity or humanity, but because they have not been faithful to the reality of Jesus himself. One might argue that the Christology of Origen, for example, had to be rejected precisely because it did conform to the accepted understanding of what is essential to deity and to humanity while in the light of Jesus Christ this understanding could no longer be regarded as authoritative.

absurdity to which reason cannot give assent. Climacus and Hick appear to be agreed on this. Secondly, the judgement of absurdity or of unintelligibility is made on the basis of prior assumptions about the nature of the divine and the human. Again Hick and Climacus are agreed but, as we shall see, the authority accorded to such assumptions by the respective authors is very different indeed.

Following Hick's statement of the general case for the unintelligibility of the doctrine he proceeds in Chapter four of *The Metaphor* to offer the examples of Apollinarius, Thomas Morris[11] and Richard Sturch[12] as instances of the church's failure to provide an intelligible account of 'two nature' Christology. In Chapters five and six he mounts a critique of the kenotic christologies of Frank Weston[13] and Stephen Davis[14] before repeating his claim that an intelligible defence of the doctrine of incarnation remains elusive.

What would Søren Kierkegaard have to say about Hick's efforts, the implication of which is that human reason provides a standard of truth which orthodox theology has been unable to meet? He would assuredly not attempt to defend the theologians cited by Hick against the critique which offers, at least not on the same terms, for to do so would be to accept two basic assumptions which are fundamentally at odds with Christian faith. The first assumption is that human reason is the legitimate arbiter of what can and cannot be held to be true. This assumption rests on the Hegelian notion that reason proceeds from nothing and this, Kierkegaard has suggested, is simply an illusion. If it is the case that human reason judges the incarnation to be absurd then two possibilities now confront us: either we may take offense or we may believe. Hick confidently recommends that we take the first option. But the alternative urged upon us by Kierkegaard is that we recognise the limitations of human reason and take leave of a conceptual framework whose explanatory power is no longer adequate to the reality which is before us in Jesus. Attempts such as those of Morris and Weston in particular, to spell out the logic of incarnation within the prevailing conceptual framework may be well-intentioned but because of their reliance upon a prejudicial conceptuality they will always be vulnerable to the charge of logical incoherence. While Hick may be correct in his assessment of such attempts, he has not thereby undermined the world view whose logic is found elsewhere

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11 *The Logic of God Incarnate* (New York and London: Cornell University Press 1986).
12 *The Word and the Christ: An Essay in Analytic Christology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991).
13 *The One Christ: An Inquiry into the Manner of the Incarnation,* 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green 1914).
14 *Logic and the Nature of God* (London: Macmillan, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983) and *Encountering Jesus,* ed. Stephen Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1988).

— in the Logos become incarnate.

That reason must give up its claims to ultimacy does not involve a compromise of reason's capacity. Faith does not require that reason should hold in abeyance its genuine objections to the doctrine of the incarnation. Climacus in fact suggests that such objections should be pursued to their limit precisely in order to effect a 'collision' with the absolute paradox and thereby to recognise that the incarnation requires a 'letting go' of our prior criterion of truth. It is a matter then, of reason recognising its own limitations. Put another way it is a matter our being addressed by a Truth which is not of our own making. It is for this reason that Climacus, in his thought experiment, speaks of the teacher as Judge. For the presence of the God-Man among us calls into question the position which human reason has claimed for itself and lays bare the existence in untruth of those who accord absolute authority to their own intellectual capacity.

Of course, it is possible to reject this judgement, to refuse the Truth which is offered to us in Christ. It is possible to draw back from the confession that in this man we are encountered by the servant form of God. We may choose instead to be the judge of Jesus Christ and thus to accord him a place within our scheme of things. We may proclaim him a wise teacher, a compassionate pastor, a revolutionary prophet. Each of these is reasonable. Each of these can be accommodated within our prior understanding of the world. And each of these may meet the demand we heard from John Hick and others to make the Christian story more plausible. On this basis we may become admirers of Christ — we may enthrone him as the incarnation of our own ideals, but we shall keep in reserve our prerogative to be the judge of him. And in this way, according to Kierkegaard, we shall also have betrayed him.

To become a Christian, in Kierkegaard's view, is, at least in part, to let go of our pretence. It is to let go of our absolute trust in human epistemological resources and to be glad of the gift of faith which God is so willing to give. It is only as we abandon our carefully reasoned determinations of what is and is not possible for God, Kierkegaard counsels, that we may be ready to recognise his servant form in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. It is important that 'recognition' is here understood as re-cognition. Christian conversion is not a retreat from coherent and intelligible thought but a reorientation to a new cognitive framework. Faith does seek understanding but it does so in a way which expects the transformation and redemption of that which we previously held to be true.[15]

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[15] Kierkegaard would undoubtedly concur with Anselm's famous dictum although, as John D. Glenn Jr has pointed out, he would certainly want to avoid the Hegelian interpretation in which faith is accorded a

Hick's demand for a demonstration of the logic of incarnation cannot, therefore, be met for the incarnation is the basis upon which our reasoning and logic are themselves transformed. In this respect the situation is analogous to our use of language. Wittgenstein has shown that an account of how language has meaning cannot be given in language. That is why Christian faith in the incarnation is expressed, confessionally and doxologically and cannot, as Hick requires, be articulated as an item within the paradigm it gives rise to, much less within the confines of any other paradigm.

The concept of *metanoia* employed in the New Testament to signify the transformation which takes place in Christian conversion is appealed to by Hick himself but without any hint that the transformation of our minds might have epistemological consequences.[16] For Hick the concept of *metanoia* refers to the shift from self-centredness to God-centredness. It denotes the 'radical turning from ego to the ultimately Real'[17] and is conceived of almost exclusively in ethical terms. There is no denying the ethical aspects of *metanoia* to which, in a previous chapter, we have already drawn attention but we do not accept Hick's assumption that our thinking and knowing processes do not also stand in need of redemptive transformation. The implications of Hick's position are clearly revealed in his quest for a theocentric rather than a christocentric Christianity in which it is assumed that a good teacher rather than a saviour will enable us to turn 'from ego to the ultimately Real'. The sufficiency of a good teacher assumes the sufficiency of our epistemic capacity and, commensurate with this Socratic proposal, Jesus becomes, in Hick's system, a vanishing moment a mere occasion who bears no essential relationship to the truth he proclaims.

The question remains, of course, whether Hick's analysis is true. It can certainly claim to be coherent just as it was when put forward by Socrates. But in opposition to it stands the 'thought experiment' of Johannes Climacus which bears much closer resemblance to the story of sinfulness and grace which is told in the New Testament. According to the New Testament story *metanoia* signifies a transformation which, while undoubtedly having ethical consequences, is first of all the restoration of sight where there had been

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temporary function and is eventually superseded by understanding. See Glenn, 'Kierkegaard and Anselm' IKC 7, 223-243. p. 226.

16 See John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan 1989) p. 45.

17 Ibid. p. 43. This turning from self-centredness to the 'ultimately Real' is claimed by Hick to be the essence of salvation in all major religions and thus an indicator of the common purpose of all religious quests. The inadequacies of this claim have been pointed out by Harold Turner, however, who draws attention to the mutually exclusive and contradictory notions of reality and of the self which can be found across the various religions. Such diversity falsifies Hick's suggestion that there is agreement between religions at the most basic level. See Harold Turner, 'Historical Support for Pluralism? The "Copernican Revolution" Revisited?' *Mission Studies* 8.1 (1991) 77-92, p. 81.

blindness. The supreme instance of human blindness, suggests Kierkegaard, is offense at God's presence in Jesus. But such blindness may be healed through receiving the gift of faith.

The objection will inevitably be mounted to this Kierkegaardian 'fragment of philosophy' that it advocates a retreat from public and universal standards of reason thus abandoning a concern for the truth and consigning Christian faith to the realm of the private and the subjective. Several things need to be said in response. First of all, Kierkegaard suggests, public consent is much more likely to obscure the truth than it is to safeguard it.[18] This is especially true in respect of Jesus Christ, for the question at stake is not only whether Jesus is the servant form of God but whether we shall agree to follow him. An affirmative answer to the first question commits us to the second. Peter's denial of Jesus serves as evidence that even a little pressure from the crowd dissuades us from such association. But do we thereby, draw closer to the truth?

Such is the challenge of discipleship! The philosophical challenge, however, is whether Kierkegaard commits us to a form of relativism or to a Christian gnosticism. It must be said, of course, that belief in the incarnation will always be a matter of faith rather than of public demonstration but this does not, I think, commit us to the errors of relativism or gnosticism. There is a Truth to be affirmed. About this Kierkegaard is unambiguous. Nor is the Truth a secret, accessible only to those with appropriate intellectual or spiritual sensitivity. The Truth is in fact a gift which is certainly available to all. Its availability, however, calls for a response, a response which begins, 'I believe...' Not least among Kierkegaard's insights is that with this confession the public will not help us.

It is undoubtedly true that a certain degree of relativity characterises all our thinking. We are inevitably constrained by the paradigm or world-view within which our thinking takes shape. This, however, is not necessarily an epistemological evil for it is precisely the constraints of a paradigm which liberate us both to seek and to communicate the truth. One need only consider the relationship between the constraints imposed and the possibilities afforded by the structure of a language in order to recognise the impossibility of conceiving of any intelligible discourse outside of such constraints. The important

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18 Kierkegaard's point that the truth cannot be put to the ballot is well made although in his tirades against 'the crowd' Kierkegaard stands in some need of correction himself. While it is beyond the scope of our present concerns there is need of a contribution to Kierkegaardian scholarship which shows the difference between the crowd and the *ekklesia*. The ecclesiological problems of his own time unfortunately blinded Kierkegaard to the positive role of the gathered community suggested in the New Testament.

question, therefore, is not whether our thinking is circular or not, but whether in confessing their faith in Jesus Christians are relating themselves to that which is ultimately true. If so there can be no other standard against which this Truth is to be judged.

The Christian way of understanding the world, which is just as surely a way of acting within it, is an attempt to tell and to live in the Truth which is true for us all. That there is no logical route from the old paradigm to the new does not consign the new to the sphere of private truth. Rather it calls for conversion, for the letting go of a paradigm which cannot adequately account for the God who shares our life by becoming human among us. If we further ask how conversion may be possible then our answer must be that the same God who is present in Jesus is present also through the Spirit upon whose power to make eloquent every Christian witness waits. Thus we come to the point where we recognise our need of grace. As a matter of logic, is there anything to choose between this story and the one offered in *The Myth of God Incarnate* ? If not then the choice that each of us makes will be a matter of faith. None of us, however, need abandon the hope that through faith we may learn the truth. In this, at least, we would do well to side with Kierkegaard.

I suggested above that Hick's argument rests upon two basic assumptions which are fundamentally at odds with Christian faith. The first was that reason is the criterion of all truth. We have attempted to offer some challenge to the legitimacy of this claim. The second, however, is perhaps more fundamental still, namely that orthodox Christian faith is constituted by its orientation to a doctrine — the doctrine of the incarnation. This is simply not the case and was tirelessly denied by Kierkegaard. Christian faith is constituted by relationship to a person — the person of Jesus Christ.[19] In chapter six I attempted to draw attention to the epistemological difference that this makes. Contrary to the Enlightenment faith in detached objectivity as the principle of epistemic success, knowledge of the person of Jesus rests upon the revelatory and transformative dynamic of personal address and response. According to this alternative epistemology the principle of epistemic success is faith and faith, we have seen, is a gift which is given by God. The point may be expressed as the epistemological claim of John MacMurray who explains that 'the form of religious reflection is necessarily determined by its data'.[20] In the case

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19 In other contexts (e.g 'Christology in an Age of Religious Pluralism' in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 35, 1981, 4-9, p. 4), Hick himself has made the same point but he rejects the notion that the ground of intelligibility for incarnational doctrine lies, not in intellectual speculation, but in personal encounter with Jesus himself.

20 John MacMurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber & Faber 1961).

of Jesus Christ the quest for a knowledge which avoids the invitation to discipleship is inappropriate to the 'data' with which we are concerned.

We must point out that Hick does not claim that objective reason ought to be able to establish the truth of the incarnation. Rather he pleads for an articulation of the doctrine which satisfies the conditions of intelligibility demanded by human reason. The point, however, following Kierkegaard, as also the New Testament, is that the doctrine is rendered intelligible, not by human intellectual effort, but by encounter with God himself, whose bestowal of the condition of faith compels us to confess with Peter and with Thomas that the man Jesus whom we know as our brother is also our Lord and Christ. The matter is as Kierkegaard has described it: 'For faith the absurd is no longer absurd.'

The deliverances of historical investigation

The second of Hick's arguments which we wish to consider is the claim that 'Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him.' This is a claim which rests on historical investigation and more particularly upon the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation which as Hick rightly notes is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Whatever else might be said about the doctrine of the incarnation it is undoubtedly concerned with asserting a fact of history. That is to say, the doctrine of the incarnation alleges that a particular historical person is also to be understood as the eternal son of God. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that a certain amount of historical evidence ought to be offered in support of such a claim. There ought to be certain facts of Jesus' biography which are open to historical investigation and which, while not necessarily establishing the truth of incarnational doctrine, are nevertheless consistent with it. Failing that, should we not do as John Hick himself recommends and fashion a new understanding of Jesus which is faithful to the historical evidence available?[21]

Hick, along with others who urge us to abandon the notion that Jesus Christ is divine, contendsthat no evidence exists or at least that not enough evidence exists to warrant such an earth-shattering conclusion. In particular, they argue that much of what counted as evidence in the past, namely the New Testament testimony concerning Jesus, can no longer bear the burden of proof which is asked of it. Modern critical study of the Bible has shown that the material in the various books of the New Testament has been shaped

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21 *The Metaphor*, chapter two.

just as much, perhaps more, by the interests and needs of the communities from which they arose as by the life and teaching of Jesus himself. Accordingly very little of the teaching attributed to Jesus by the gospel writers, for example, can certainly be traced back to Jesus himself. Similarly a great many of the events supposed to be a part of his ministry are now reckoned to be of doubtful historical value. So the picture of Jesus which is presented to us in the New Testament owes much more to the high and perhaps exaggerated regard in which he was held by the early churches than it does to the actual life of Jesus and the way he understood himself. Hick himself explains that 'The Gospels are secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades, the original first-hand memories of Jesus being variously preserved, winnowed, developed, distorted, magnified and overlaid through the interplay of many factors...'[22]

By way of example Hick offers the New Testament confession of Jesus as the Messiah. 'It is far from certain', writes Hick, 'that Jesus applied this to himself... More probably it was the Church that subsequently made this identification.'[23] The argument can and has been extended to cover virtually the entire body of christological material in the New Testament which has traditionally been appealed to in defence of the doctrine of incarnation. At the conclusion of such a process we are left with a minimal description of Jesus which may be regarded as certain historical knowledge. E. P. Sanders, for example, reports that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist, was a Galilean who preached and healed in various parts of Israel, attracted a certain number of disciples, was engaged in a controversy concerning the Temple, was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities and was succeeded after his death by a group of followers who underwent some persecution.[24] Hick adds that Jesus was the son of a woman named Mary.[25] Notably absent from this list is anything that would appear to justify the claim that Jesus was in any way divine. Indeed in chapter three of *The Metaphor* Hick marshals an impressive array of scholars to support his contention that the historically reliable data gives no hint that Jesus himself thought that he was divine. If Jesus was in fact ignorant of his own alleged divinity then this, it must be acknowledged, represents a crippling blow for incarnational claims about him. Certainly, as Hick points out, it would be extremely problematic for Christians to maintain that they know something about Jesus

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22 *The Metaphor*, p. 16.

23 *The Metaphor*, p. 20. A more extensive discussion of the alleged lack of continuity between Jesus' self-understanding and the titles attributed to him by the Church is offered by Frances Young in 'A Cloud of Witnesses' *The Myth*, 13-47.

24 Sanders' catena of certain knowledge about Jesus is taken from John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press and Philadelphia: Trinity Press 1990) p. 52f.

25 *The Metaphor*, p. 18.

which he did not know himself, especially something as momentous as his divinity.

In responding to Hick's argument it is worth noting, first of all, a hermeneutical difficulty which he himself conceals. In attempting to outline the current state of New Testament scholarship Hick states, 'the identifiable consensus begins with a distinction between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the post-Easter development of the church's mingled memories and interpretations of him. And it is a basic premise of modern New Testament scholarship that we have access to the former only through the latter.'[26] Leaving aside for the moment questions as to the appropriateness of such a distinction between the historical Jesus and the post-Easter christology, Hick's own admission that 'we have access to the former only through the latter' requires the announcement of criteria by which the two are to be distinguished. No such criteria are offered to us by Hick and thus one of the most fundamental issues in the whole debate is ignored. Following Kierkegaard, we may ask whether such inquiry proceeds under the quasi-Hegelian illusion that it has no presuppositions of its own. If so then Hick's sceptical account of what we may know of Jesus creates more hermeneutical problems than he cares to admit. In particular Hick avoids the problem of why his christology should be recognised as more faithful to the 'real' Jesus than that of the New Testament writers. The problem is confounded by Hick's admission that even what little is known of Jesus is known through these very same New Testament writers. There are in fact, only three possible strategies for overcoming such difficulties. Firstly one might adduce an alternative source of information about Jesus but such alternative sources as there are either make more 'fantastic' claims about Jesus than those which Hick wants to reject (e.g the apocryphal Gospels) or present only the merest historical reference to Jesus which can hardly warrant the revisions which Hick demands (e.g Pliny, Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus). Secondly, one might appeal to some contemporary experience of Christ's presence which significantly modifies the new Testament witness to him. This strategy, although adopted by some, is hardly likely to appeal to Hick since it presumes the resurrection and thus accords to Jesus Christ the very significance which Hick wants to deny. The third strategy is to assume without giving reasons, the superiority of 'modern' hermeneutical instincts or paradigms and thus to make selective use of the New Testament according to our current interests and projects. This seems to be the position which Hick adopts and is most obvious in his appeal to the New Testament for support when advocating an exemplarist rather than a redemptive soteriology. We shall return to this matter below.

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26 *The Metaphor*, p. 15.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to enter the New Testament debates in any detail it is increasingly recognised that the celebrated historical-critical method harbours prejudicial assumptions which are critically determinative of the results it achieves.[27] The solution to this dilemma, Kierkegaard reminds us, is not the pursuit of a presuppositionless place to stand; no such place exists, but rather the ready acknowledgment of the epistemological role of faith. Such acknowledgment, it must be emphasised, should not compromise our concern for truth. Rather it advances the quest for truth by rehabilitating critical consideration not only of 'what' we may find but 'how' we may find it.

It is also worth noting that even apart from the 'hermeneutical revolution'[28] in which Biblical studies is currently engaged, the extreme scepticism which underlies much of twentieth century Biblical scholarship, and which has produced the minimal description of Jesus already cited, is not shared by all who study the New Testament in a serious scholarly way. Many New Testament scholars are much more ready to affirm a basic reliability in the New Testament witness to Jesus than is acknowledged by John Hick. Raymond Brown, for example, while admitting that 'no universally accepted positions on the relationship of Jesus' christology to that of his followers' has been arrived at, nevertheless claims that, 'the extreme positions at either end of the spectrum (no difference, no continuity) have fewer and fewer advocates'.[29] Brown himself is a strong proponent of the view that the christologies of the early church represent a growth in the understanding of who Jesus is and are not a *creatio ex nihilo*.[30]

It must be conceded, however, that the more moderate approach is very far from arguing that the New Testament provides evidence of a kind which proves the incarnation true. In this respect, the revisionist's claim that there is insufficient historical evidence to justify belief in Jesus as divine, undoubtedly holds good. We shall have to ask ourselves, therefore, whether the lack of evidence obliges us, if not to reject the doctrine of the incarnation, then at least to reserve judgement.

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27 On which, see Richard Sturch,*The Word and the Christ,* especially Chapter 18. Also Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press 1994).
28 On the nature and extent of this hermeneutical revolution see Francis Watson's editor's 'Introduction' to *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press 1993) 1-12, p. 2.
29 Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994) p. 15.
30 Similar positions are taken by Graham Stanton and Eduard Schweizer, for example. See Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974) and his article in response to Hick et al., 'Incarnational Christology in the New Testament' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 151-173, and Schweizer, *Jesus* (London: SCM Press 1971).

Before hastening to do as Hick advises, however, let us again consider the 'how' of Christian faith. In the course of our study of *Philosophical Fragments* we found Climacus suggesting that the reality of the God-Man is simply not open either to confirmation or to refutation by means of historical investigation. The most comprehensive accumulation of historical data concerning Jesus, Climacus argues, would yet be insufficient to establish the veracity of the confession that he is divine. This is simply because divinity as a category is not one in respect of which the methods of historical research have any competence. It should be noted that this limitation to the competence of historical scholarship is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It has frequently been pointed out that 'historians' of former times would not have thought to exclude divine presence and agency from their considerations. This is certainly the case with the Biblical writers. But neither were they blind to the fiduciary framework within which they operated. Their testimony has the character of passionate witness but it is not on that account, bound to obscure the truth. That is more likely to be the fault of an investigative method which claims competence beyond the scope of its own inquiry.[31]

One final point might be made in response to Hick. It is alleged that the historical evidence points away from rather than towards the Church's confession that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. It is important to be clear that such a judgement presumes the availability of another source of information about the character and activity of God. We are entitled to ask, therefore, by what standard Hick proclaims that God does not behave in the way that is confessed of him in Jesus? On the basis of his historical investigations Hick has claimed that no explicit, historically verifiable announcement of his divinity by Jesus can be found in the Biblical witness and that this must lead us to doubt whether Jesus was really divine. But why should it? Is not the explicit announcement or demonstration of his divine authority precisely what the Gospels record Jesus as resisting in the stories of his temptation in the wilderness? What is at stake in Jesus' temptations is the nature of his ministry. Will he, as contemplated by the king in Climacus' parable,[32] attempt to win the love of human beings by an irresistible manifestation of his glory thereby undermining the very love he seeks, or will he take the way of lowliness so that

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[31] I am not suggesting here that modern historical-critical methods have no contribution to make to our reading of the New Testament and subsequent understanding of Jesus Christ. Rather I am suggesting, in agreement with Francis Watson, that 'it is no longer plausible to identify the products of historical-critical discovery and hypothesis with the full reality of the biblical texts. Where historical questions are put to the texts, the texts will no doubt return the appropriate historical answers, but this circular process offers no guarantee that the initial questions constitute the only legitimate means of access to them.' (*The Open Text*, p. 2.) Where a wider hermeneutical framework is acknowledged there is every possibility that a less sceptical utilisation of historical-critical method will play its part in enabling us to understand who Jesus is.

[32] *Fragments*, chapter two.

we may learn to love him, not for his power and glory, but because of his love for us? It is precisely the lowliness which is the offense but offense is the risk that true love must take.

Hick is undoubtedly correct in his contention that the majority of New Testament scholars accept that Jesus himself made no explicit claims to divinity but not all such scholars accept that this obliges us to reject the doctrine of the incarnation. Commenting upon Jesus' resistance to titles which are suggestive of his divinity, Eduard Schweizer writes,

> [Jesus] refuses to use titles which of necessity define and delimit, to make God's free action an object of human thought, placing it at the disposal of the human mind. By his very act of avoiding all common labels Jesus keeps free the heart of the man who encounters him. He wants to enter into this heart himself, in all the reality of what he does and says, not as an image already formed before he himself has a chance to encounter the person.[33]

Schweizer's point is a clear echo of Climacus' parable in chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments.* Explicit manifestation of glory, direct communication in Kierkegaard's terms, encourages objectivity and detachment. Obeisance rather than love is the unwanted but likely result.

Had the thought of the incarnation arisen in human hearts it would undoubtedly have involved an unambiguous manifestation of divinity which simply could not be rejected. But what authority can be accorded human estimations about how God should and should not behave? Kierkegaard suggests that it is no less coherent to suspect that God's presence among us is the ultimate confounding of human expectation. 'The god', to recall the thought experiment of the *Fragments,* 'has made his appearance as a teacher. He has taken the form of a servant.' This self limitation of God introduces an uncertainty, an ambiguity, a paradox into the reality of his presence which precludes his immediately being recognised by those around him. God's lowliness in Jesus is the contradiction of human estimations of what God must be like. The one who associated with outcasts, ate with sinners, healed on the Sabbath, far from confirming contemporary understandings of God, convinced many that this man was a blasphemer.

Kierkegaard's point is helpfully illustrated by considering Jewish Messianic expectations. Although the Hebrew Scriptures reveal considerable diversity in the Jewish

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[33] Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus,* p. 22.

hopes for the Messiah there is a strong band of tradition in which such expectation expressed the hope for a mighty King whose political strength and leadership would confirm Israel as God's chosen people and restore them to prominence among the nations. Under the condition of such hopes it is no wonder that Jesus was barely recognised as God's anointed one. And yet the New Testament testifies that this carpenter's son from Nazareth is indeed the Messiah, the Holy One of God. It insists that the old understanding of what Messiah means must now give way to a new understanding shaped by the person of Jesus. A similar confounding of expectation takes place when it is confessed that Jesus is 'Lord'. For in common understanding a Lord is a person of political power with considerable civic authority and influence. Even in its theological use Lordship referred to the power and dominion of God, his majesty and his glory. Little wonder then that few were prepared to recognise the Lord in the one who set aside all power, took a towel and began to wash his disciples feet.[34]

In stark contrast to the Biblical testimony, Hick contends that,

> From our point of view today it would require earth-shaking miracles, overturning the whole established secular world-view, to cause an historical individual to be regarded as being also God. For we have come under the influence of centuries of Christian [sic] thought to mean by God the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe.[35]

Our reading of the New Testament would suggest that the confirmation of the presence of God through earth-shaking miracles, far from being the overturning of the 'established secular world-view' would amount to its confirmation. Such a view is itself overturned by the God whose eternity and omnipotence and omniscience is disclosed in the constancy of his love which is shown to be true love precisely in its lowliness and vulnerability.

If revelation is to be taken seriously as revelation then by means of it a new understanding of God is introduced to those to whom God is disclosed. Put another way, revelation is constitutive of a new theological paradigm. For those who apprehend it revelation makes sense of itself. We should not be surprised, therefore, if according to

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[34] This is, of course, a circular argument but it is not on that account invalid. All that is required for my point to stand is consent on the part of my interlocutors to the idea that God is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. It makes no difference whether or not such consent is expressed in terms of the incarnation. John Hick, in this case, is happy to acclaim the revelatory significance of Jesus.

[35] *The Metaphor,* p. 40. Whether the meanings imputed by Hick to the listed divine attributes is Christian in character is certainly open to question. Hick's appeal to the attributes in order to refute the view that God could be in Christ would suggest not.

our old paradigms, Biblical witness to the presence of God in Christ makes no sense at all. But again, our definition of what makes sense in this world cannot be separated from the question of where our faith is placed.

Mythology and metaphor

We turn now to a third argument of *The Metaphor*. On the basis of what has gone before Hick, in chapter ten, elucidates his claim that 'the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal'. This represents a terminological, though not a substantial, modification of the position taken in 1977 with *The Myth of God Incarnate.* The terminological adjustment is advisable, Hick suggests, because the western mind is not well attuned to the concept of myth.[36] With either term, however, Hick admits to proposing a substantial modification of incarnational doctrine itself which was originally intended in a literal way. According to Hick, Christian theology would be well advised to abandon attempts to articulate the incarnation in terms of an ontological unity between Jesus and the one he called 'Father' (to say nothing of the Holy Spirit), and to settle instead for a metaphorical explanation of what is meant by this most fundamental of Christian claims. What is meant, Hick explains, may usefully be indicated in three ways:

> (1) In so far as Jesus was doing God's will, God was acting through him on earth and was in this respect 'incarnate' in Jesus' life; (2) In so far as Jesus was doing God's will he 'incarnated' the ideal of human life lived in openness and response to God; (3) In so far as Jesus lived a life of self-giving love, or *agape* , he 'incarnated' a love that is a finite reflection of the infinite divine love. The truth or the appropriateness of the metaphor depends upon its being literally true that Jesus lived in obedient response to the divine presence, and that he lived a life of unselfish love.[37]

The three things incarnated, according to Hick, are God's will, the ideal of human life, and love. This, it is said, is a far more plausible view than the Nicene confession that Jesus was 'of one being with the Father'.[38] Hick further suggests that 'the idea of the

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[36] *The Metaphor,* p. 161.
[37] Ibid. p. 105.
[38] A comment ought to be made here about Hick's understanding of metaphor. While he acknowledges that 'metaphorical speech is... akin to poetry and shares its non-translatability into literal prose (*The Metaphor,* p. 100), a translation of the 'metaphor' of the incarnation into literal prose is precisely what has been attempted in the citation above. Thus his real commitment is revealed in his comment that 'a metaphor's central thrust can be literally translated' albeit with loss of 'ramifying overtones and emotional colour' (Ibid.). This is not an understanding of metaphor with which I concur but for the sake of the present argument I shall continue to assume it. For a more thorough critique of Hick's understanding of metaphor see Nicholas Lash, 'Interpretation and Imagination' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 19-26.

incarnation of God in the life of Jesus, so understood, is thus not a metaphysical claim about Jesus having two natures, but a metaphorical statement of the significance of a life through which God was acting on earth. In Jesus we see a man living in a startling degree of awareness of God and response to God's presence'.[39]

This last expression of the metaphorical meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation is strongly reminiscent of Schleiermacher to whose theological lineage Hick elsewhere claims to belong.[40] This, along with the claim that the 'truth' of the incarnation is best understood as mythological or metaphorical speech warrants comparison with Climacus' 'poetical venture' in *Philosophical Fragments* whereby a poetic articulation of Christian faith was attempted. In that venture, we recall, Climacus constructs a poetic model of 'the god's' participation in time. He gives to the poet the task of 'finding a solution' to the gulf which separates human beings from the love of God.[41] Thereupon unfolds the story of the lowly maiden and the king whose love can only be fulfilled when he descends from his throne and shares in the lowly estate of the one he loves. The incarnational overtones are unmistakable but the critical question to ask is whether this is just a story. Is it merely a *possibility* owing much to the imagination of the poet and little to the *actuality* of the world? Possibility and actuality, we recall from chapter two were the respective spheres of the poetic and the existential. In consideration of the proposal of John Hick we face again the question of whether the incarnation is a poetic construction, serving the interests of human imagination and devotion, or whether it is the mode of divine existence making actual God's presence among us. Climacus, we saw, begged forgiveness for his 'curious mistaken notion of having composed it [the poem] himself' and concludes, 'it was a mistaken notion, and the poem was so different from every human poem that it was no poem at all but *the wonder.*'[42] Hick, on the other hand, is committed to the view, posed ironically by Climacus, that the incarnation is the fanciful product of human imagination.

Hick's concern to deny the actuality of the incarnation is motivated in part by his offense at the scandal of particularity.[43] A concern for the salvation of those who, being temporally and spatially remote from Jesus Christ, know nothing of the salvation he offers leads Hick to deny the unique significance of Jesus' life and thus also the claim

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39 *The Metaphor,* p. 106.
40 See *God Has Many Names,* p. 3. That Hick embraces Schleiermacher's Christology is even more apparent in *The Second Christianity,* where he refers to Jesus as possessing 'an intense God-consciousness'. p. 27.
41 *Fragments,* p. 28.
42 Ibid. p. 36.
43 See *The Metaphor,* p. 154.

that he was God incarnate. We will have more to say on this matter in Appendix One below, but of interest for us in this chapter is that Hick's strategy of proclaiming the incarnation a myth or a metaphor conforms precisely to Kierkegaard's contention that recourse to the poetic represents a flight from existence, an escape from both actuality and particularity. As we noted in chapter two, this is a Romantic strategy which in the guise of an intelligible rendering of reality manages only to detach itself from the pathos of existence.

The art of transferring actuality into mythology or into metaphor (in the sense which Hick uses the term) is a means of denying the giveness of the past and marks a retention of one's freedom over actuality.[44] This manifests itself in the claim of Hick, coming after his denial of the historical reliability of the Gospels, that Jesus 'was doing God's will', '"incarnated" the ideal of human life lived in openness and response to God' and '"incarnated" a love that is a finite reflection of the infinite divine love'. Jesus becomes an instance, but by no means the unique instance, of the manifestation of these universal ideals. Accordingly, the particularity of Jesus is no longer the clue to what 'God's will', 'the ideal human life' and 'love' might be. The moment is no longer decisive, the teacher is a vanishing point and some point of departure other than the historical must be found for one's eternal consciousness. At the very least, therefore, Hick ought to stop speaking of Jesus as in some sense revelatory of God. Beyond that he owes us an explanation of where his ideals have their source. One suspects that his source is the range of intuitive human values which find expression in most religious movements and which become in turn, the confirmation of Hick's 'discovery' of 'divine revelation' across the whole scope of human religious history.[45] Hick thus participates in what Colin Gunton identifies as the modernist tendency to 'suppress the particular through the universal and in post-modernism's homogenizing tendency to attribute to all particulars essentially the same value'.[46] But Gunton has also pointed out that this allegedly modern procedure has its roots as far back as Heraclitus and received seminal formulation in the work of Plato. In opposition to this apparently ubiquitous temptation, Kierkegaard, in *Two Ages,* decried the tendency to shape everything into a homogeneous lump.[47]

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[44] I owe the insight to David Gouwens. See his discussion of Kierkegaard's critique of Romanticism in *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Imagination,* p. 60.

[45] Trust in the reliability of human religious insights is a characteristic of what Climacus in the *Postscript* calls 'Religiousness A'. Within this scheme Christianity is conceived as 'an evolution within the total category of human nature' (p. 559). This is precisely the view that Hick recommends.

[46] Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993) p. 70.

[47] The priority of the particular over the universal is also seen as a defining characteristic of the thought of Karl Barth whose whole work might be seen as the attempt to think through the recognition that 'in this particular [Jesus Christ] the general has its meaning and fulfilment' *Church Dogmatics,* II,ii, p. 6.

Commensurate with modernism's vision of the world Hick's recommendation that we understand the incarnation as a metaphorical idea serves his purpose of denying the actuality of God's presence in Christ. The strategy takes effect as Hick interprets the particularity of Jesus under the framework of universal ideals thus allowing him 'to speak of one thing in terms suggestive of another'[48] — to speak of Jesus in a way which validates theological intuitions imported from elsewhere. This impulse stands in stark contrast to Climacus' 'project of thought' in which the disclosure of God in Christ requires the radical revision, even the abandonment of our prior theological ideas. It appears, therefore, that the transformation of the incarnation to myth or metaphor results at the very least in 'a second Christianity' and perhaps, if we think Kierkegaard to be correct, in nothing like Christianity at all. It remains for us to inquire whether Hick's assumed priority of the universal over the particular can be true? The quest for an answer, however, places us again before Jesus with the question of whether we shall take offense or whether we shall believe.

Presuppositions and paradigms

In foregoing chapters we have attempted to show that an answer to the Christological question thus posed depends upon one's allegiance to prior fiduciary frameworks, paradigms or plausibility structures. We do not offer this, however, as news to John Hick who is at least partially aware of the paradigmatic constraint of our knowing processes.[49] Indeed Hick himself, by way of introduction to his call for a revision of the traditional understanding of the incarnation, gives an account of the paradigm according to which he thinks the decision about Jesus ought to be made. In a chapter entitled, 'Today's Starting Point' Hick explains that the 'thought world' of the biblical writers has gradually given way to a 'modern scientific world-view', the authority and unambiguity of which he seems to regard as self-evident.[50] In addition, says Hick, we are now participant in 'a new global consciousness' which 'has prompted a more sensitive

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[48] The citation is taken from Janet Martin Soskice and describes the functioning of metaphorical speech. See her *Metaphor and Religious Language,* p. 54. Hick cites Soskice approvingly in his own discussion of metaphor although Hick's views ought not to be imputed to Soskice herself.

[49] He betrays this awareness, however, when he assumes the validity of his own paradigm to be self-evident and when on p. 39 he calls for upholders of the doctrine of the incarnation to 'justify' their position.

[50] The appeal to a 'modern scientific world-view' is a recurring feature in numerous of Hick's writings but this seems to be a cipher for a largely discredited scientism. He shows little awareness of current trends in the philosophy of science which encourage a far more modest account of what science may and may not tell us, and offers no response to contemporary scientists like John Polkinghorne, for example, who deny the conflict between modern science and belief in the incarnation which Hick seems to regard as self-evident.

awareness of the variety of cultures and faiths within the human family'.[51] This awareness has forced upon the Christian community the recognition both that religious allegiance is, in the vast majority of cases, determined by an accident of birth, and that one is just as likely to find loving, compassionate, honest, generous and thoughtful human beings in other religious traditions as in Christianity. 'It is this new public awareness', says Hick, 'that has undermined the plausibility of the traditional Christian sense of superiority and has thereby set a question mark against its theological core in the dogma that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate.'[52] Implicit in this second aspect of the new paradigm is the modernist and post-modernist propensity we have already met to deny to particular episodes in human history a privileged relation to the truth and to accord to all particulars essentially the same value. Under the condition of such assumptions a place of equal value must be found for Jesus amongst religious leaders and teachers of every time and place. The paradigm Hick offers constrains us to respond to Jesus in this way.

A further utilisation of this levelling strategy occurs in chapter four of *The Metaphor* where Hick explains that the title 'son of God' was a common ascription in the Hellenic and Hebraic worlds of Jesus' time and implied no unique status for the one upon whom the title was bestowed. The argument of the chapter is that theologians of later times who did not share the thought world of the biblical writers heard the language of divine sonship and mistakenly assumed an identity of being between Jesus and his God. Hick contends, with support from Geza Vermes, that these later theologians were guilty of what we might call a paradigm mistake, of failing to interpret the proclamation of the New Testament texts against the background of the prevailing world view. In consequence, claims Hick, and under the influence of Greek philosophical ideas 'a metaphorical son of God [became] the metaphysical God the Son, second person of the Trinity.'[53] Thus in Hick's view, a lack of sympathy with the New Testament paradigm and the imposition of a paradigm essentially foreign to the New Testament has led the Church into a sadly mistaken response to the question of Jesus: 'Who do you say that I am?'

There are in fact a number of paradigms discussed in Hick's arguments which compete for explanatory power. There is first of all, the paradigm of the New Testament writers themselves.[54] Secondly there is the paradigm of Greek philosophy which Hick

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51 *The Metaphor*, p. 8.
52 Ibid. p. 9.
53 *The Metaphor*, p. 44f.
54 For some purposes the suggestion that there is a single New Testament paradigm would certainly be misleading. It seems legitimate for the purposes of the present argument, however, to assume that the

represents as distorting the message of the New Testament. And thirdly there is the twentieth century paradigm whose defining characteristics, according to Hick, are a 'scientific' understanding of the world and an appreciative awareness of the transformative power of a wide range of human religious traditions.[55] Hick contends that this third paradigm constitutes the impetus to a more sensitive recovery of the first, while the second is isolated as the rogue by which Christian theology was set upon its path to a mistaken deification of Jesus the man.

A great many interesting questions are prompted by Hick's suggestions. Most importantly for our purposes we are bound to ask whether Hick has represented the matter fairly. Is it the case that the New Testament writers did not intend to say anything which would constitute agreement with the later formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon? Were the theologians of Nicaea and Chalcedon so seriously misled by their allegiance to principles of Greek thought that they failed to hear the true meaning of the New Testament witness? And, are those who claim allegiance to the twin pillars of a modern scientific world view and inter-religious tolerance really required to give up the idea that in Jesus of Nazareth we are encountered by the servant form of God? Hick has offered an affirmative answer to each of these questions but there are others who offer equally compelling negative answers, who contend that the New Testament texts are 'incipiently incarnational',[56] that the theologians of Nicaea and Chalcedon were compelled by their reading of the New Testament to assert something quite contrary to the heritage of Greek thought from which they had come,[57] and finally, that an incarnational understanding of Jesus is precisely what has made possible both the development of modern science and the mandate for constructive interaction with the religious traditions of others.[58]

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undoubted differences between the thought forms of the various authors are less significant than their single concern to proclaim as good news the life death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

[55] At many points, Hick's appreciation of other religious traditions appears to be totally indiscriminate. See, for example, his approving essay on the claim of the *Bhagavad Gita* that, 'whatever path men choose is mine' (IV, 11). The essay of that title appears in *God has Many Names,* 43-58. Obviously, however, this principle must be abandoned as soon as one becomes concerned with ethics and with truth as Hick himself frequently does.

[56] This is the claim of Graham Stanton, for example, who in his essay entitled, 'Incarnational Christology in the New Testament' gives a quite different reading of the 'Son of God' title discussed by Hick.

[57] See Stanton again, Ibid. p. 152 and more extensively Alasdair I. C. Heron in 'Homoousios with the Father' *The Incarnation,* ed.T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press 1981) 58-87, who points out that in respect of Nicaea, 'the real victory of Hellenism would have come about if Arius rather than Athanasius had succeeded in carrying the day.' p. 73.

[58] The former claim has been argued most prominently by Stanley Jaki in, e.g *Science and Creation,* 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1986) and the second by Alan Torrance in 'Response to Gavin D'Costa' an unpublished paper given to a conference on Religious Pluralism at King's College London in March 1995. In support of both claims see Harold Turner's 'Historical Support for Pluralism? The "Copernican Revolution" Revisited?'

The considerable importance and interest of such debates notwithstanding however, a resolution of them in one way or another will not settle the fundamental question with which we have been concerned, namely the propriety of confessing Jesus to be divine. With this recognition we return to Kierkegaard who maintains that the usual modes of human inquiry: reason, imagination and historical investigation, are inadequate to the task of understanding who Jesus is. Faith alone is the condition by which the truth is known and is itself constitutive of the paradigm through which these earlier questions may be explored.

Kierkegaard's point facilitates no immediate resolution to the problems which Hick has raised and will very likely elicit the charge of circularity against those who hold the incarnation to be true. Such a charge however, would be misplaced for it is not the case that the incarnation is established on the basis of premises which already assume it. This would certainly be circular. In contrast, faith in the God-Man, far from being the conclusion of any process of thought, is the 'Archimedean point' from which all Christian thinking begins. Stephen Sykes makes much the same point when he writes,

> The significance of this story [of the incarnation] for the Christian tradition is that it has become the paradigm for construing who God is in the other scriptural stories in which God figures. This paradigm provides the interpreter with a standard for saying whether or not what God is said to have done elsewhere in the scriptures is 'in character'.[59]

Of course the telling of the story cannot fail, as Sykes also points out, 'to show the marks of the intellectual milieu in which it was developed'[60] and, we might add, in which it is retold, but beyond the cultural and temporally bound paradigms which Hick identifies, the relationship of faith in Jesus Christ lays claim to be constitutive of a paradigm which uniquely yields understanding of who God is and who we are and the good news of our redemption in Christ.[61]

Accepting, for the sake of argument, that faith in Jesus Christ is constitutive of a paradigm and cannot itself be an object within any paradigm, the inquiring mind will still

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[59] Stephen Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 115-127, p. 124.
[60] Ibid. p. 115.
[61] Given the claim to uniqueness here we shall have to consider further Hick's contention that the assertion of uniqueness breeds a sense of superiority, intolerance and even persecution of others. In the meantime I simply deny it but pledge to return to the matter in the appendices below.

want to ask, reformulating the basic question of Jesus' identity, whether one's faith in Christ is properly placed. Is Jesus Christ worthily confessed to be the ultimate criterion of all theological speech? To this there can be no answer except to say that if God is really revealed in Jesus then faith in him is well placed. And if not then not! There simply are no external criteria by which the veracity of revelation can be determined. Such an answer may not seem to get us very far but by means of it an illuminative contrast with Hick's own position becomes possible. Hick appeals, as we have seen, to modern science and to a growing respect for a variety of religious traditions. He recommends, further, that our theological claims be tested in the light of them. There is an assumption here that divine revelation, if there is such a thing, will conform to the structures of intelligibility offered by the modern world-view. But this seems a rather less cogent act of faith than that which allows revelation to speak for itself.

Salvation as human transformation

The fourth of Hick's arguments in *The Metaphor* is concerned with whether, having denied the ontological unity between Jesus and the one whom he called Father, we may continue to speak of Jesus as in some manner the bearer of God's salvific purpose for humankind. Hick gives an affirmative answer to this question albeit in the qualified sense which we have already met, namely 'that we can rightly take Jesus... as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence'. Hick offers an elucidation of this position in chapters twelve and thirteen of *The Metaphor*. Chapter twelve begins with the astonishing claim that 'The basic fault of the traditional understandings of salvation within the Western development of Christianity is that they have no room for divine forgiveness!'[62] He immediately proceeds, however, to betray his misunderstanding of the Western tradition with the explanation that 'a forgiveness that has to be bought by the bearing of a just punishment, or the giving of an adequate satisfaction or the offering of a sufficient sacrifice, is not forgiveness, but merely an acknowledgment that the debt has been paid in full.'[63] I do not deny that the models of atonement to which Hick refers have frequently been abused in a manner which gives substance to his claim but ironically, it is primarily when Jesus' life death and resurrection are evacuated of divine agency in the way that Hick recommends, that these traditional ways of understanding the atonement obscure the forgiving action of God to which they otherwise bear witness.[64]

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62 *The Metaphor*, p. 127.
63 Ibid.
64 A corrective to Hick's view may be found in Colin Gunton's *The Actuality of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1988).

Hick continues his assault upon the traditional language of atonement throughout the remainder of chapter twelve without, however, showing any signs of understanding what the traditional language seeks to convey. Of more interest is the emergence of an alternative soteriology in which Jesus of Nazareth is conceived as a pioneer of human transformation and an exemplar for those who follow him. This exemplary role reaches its height in the crucifixion in which Jesus 'gave himself utterly to God in faith and trust'. Hick continues, 'his cross was thus a powerful manifestation and continuing symbol of the divine kingdom in this present world, as a way of life in which one turns the other cheek, forgives one's enemies 'unto seventy times seven', trusts God in even the darkness of pain, horror and tragedy, and is continually raised again to the new life of faith.'[65]

One is tempted to ask, 'Where is the logic in that?' but because, following Kierkegaard, we are not offended by such a radical overturning of common sense it is more appropriate at this point to voice our agreement that the meaning of the cross should be expressed in these terms. Jesus is legitimately understood as exemplar, as pioneer of our salvation or, in the words of Kierkegaard, as the prototype whom we are called to imitate. But where Hick rests content with a moral influence theory of Christ's salvific role Kierkegaard presses on to the recognition that a prototypal saviour is not enough for us. Through his pseudonym, Climacus, Kierkegaard comments that 'never in all eternity is it true that someone has been assisted in doing the good by someone else's *actually* having done it.'[66] We who repeatedly fail in our efforts to live according to the ideal which is presented in Christ require one who is also our redeemer, who acts for us where we cannot act ourselves. It is almost impossible to find in Kierkegaard's writings a discussion of Christ as prototype which does not at the same time emphasise that he is also redeemer. Thus we find him insisting that,

> it must be firmly maintained that Christ has not come into the world only to set an example [*Exempel*] for us. In that case we would have law and works-righteousness again. He comes to save us and to present the example. This very example should humble us, teach us how infinitely far away we are from resembling the ideal. When we humble ourselves, then Christ is pure compassion. And in our striving to approach the prototype [*Forbilledet*], the prototype itself is again our very help. It alternates; when we are striving, then he is the prototype; and when we stumble, lose courage, etc., then he is the love which helps us up, and then he is the prototype

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65 *The Metaphor,* p. 132.
66 *Postscript,* p. 359.

again.[67]

Where for Hick the *dynamis* or *energeia* of salvation must always be sought in the human capacity to follow after Christ's example, Kierkegaard's dialectic between prototype and redeemer finds the power of salvation in the divine grace to which we 'learn to flee'.[68] Human dependence upon grace is a direct corollary of human sinfulness and is that which, as we have seen, distinguishes Christianity from all forms of the Socratic. 'For this reason only', says Kierkegaard in his *Journals*, 'is Christianity the absolute religion because it conceives of men as sinners, for no other distinction can in this way recognise man in his difference from God.'[69] It is not at all surprising then to see in Hick a down-playing of human sinfulness,[70] a confidence in the theological sufficiency of human epistemic capacity[71] and a consequent exemplary christology and soteriology. But this represents, I would suggest, a much less profound understanding of the human situation than is offered by Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's position, however, is not self-evidently true. The extent of human sinfulness and thus the folly of trusting salvation to our own capacity to follow Christ is itself revealed by God. 'Only the god', says Climacus, 'could teach the consciousness of sin'.[72] And Kierkegaard himself adds, 'Face to face with 'grace' a person really learns to know what lies deepest in a man.'[73] This is why 'the god' as both prototype and redeemer is also our judge.[74] He it is who lays bare the extent to which human beings fall short of the life which he himself perfects and he it is who, by sharing in our lowliness and thereby risking offense, embraces with divine love those who have gone astray. Kierkegaard writes,

> The fact that Jesus died for my sins certainly expresses the magnitude of grace... The remarkable thing about it is that just when God expresses his condescension he also expresses indirectly his infinite elevation. I am willing to become reconciled with men, he says (what condescension!) on the condition that my son be allowed to be sacrificed for you — what an infinite distance of

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67 *Journals*, 1/334, X^1 A 285 (1849).
68 *Journals*, 2/1785, X^3 A 268 (1850).
69 *Journals*, 1/46, V A 16 (1844).
70 See, for example, *The Metaphor*, p. 116f.
71 This confidence does not presume infallibility or a comprehensive knowledge of God but Hick does accord to human religious intuitions a soteriological sufficiency enabling us to live transformed or 'other centred' lives.
72 *Fragments*, p. 47.
73 *Journals*, 2/1488, X^5 A 7 (1852).
74 *Fragments*, p. 18.

elevation, if this is the sole condition![75]

The clue to the interpretation of this passage is provided for us in *Philosophical Fragments* where the parable of the king who loves a lowly maiden bears witness to the love of God which seeks expression in ways which do not violate the people we are. Thus God's response to our decision to live in alienation and lowliness is met with the decision to become lowly himself even to the point of suffering the death which is rightfully ours. It is in this way that Christ's death becomes an atonement, for in suffering death in our place, even this place of deepest alienation is redeemed by the presence of God. We must agree therefore, that Hick's caricature of God as 'a feudal lord or a stern cosmic moralist'[76] seeking appeasement through the shedding of blood could not be further from the Truth. Against Hick, however, we contend that such a caricature of the sacrificial death of Christ has nothing in common with an orthodox Christian faith other than a partial and extremely regrettable terminological overlap.[77] But this is certainly no grounds for a rejection of the view that Christ has died for our sin.[78]

Going beyond or going back?

We have surveyed four of the six arguments offered by John Hick in his advocacy of a revision of the Christian confession that Jesus is both God and man. This involves for Hick, a redefinition of Christian faith in which God replaces Christ as the centre of Christian devotion. Such redefinition only makes sense of course, if one accepts Hick's contention that God and Christ are ontologically distinct. We have tried to show, in reliance upon Søren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments,* that Hick's arguments are very far from conclusive. Indeed, in his appeals to reason and to historical investigation and in his redescription of the incarnation as a myth or a metaphor Hick bears strong

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[75] *Journals,* 2/1471, X^2 A 189 (1849).
[76] *The Metaphor,* p. 132.
[77] In response to a similar caricature advanced by Hick elsewhere Charles Moule comments, 'What Professor Hick seems to have overlooked is that this idea not only does not cohere with Jesus' revelation of God, but is not to be found in the New Testament anywhere. It is a travesty of the gospel and the incarnational Christology he is attacking has nothing whatever to do with it.' 'Incarnation and Atonement: A Comment on Professor Hick's Critique of Atonement Doctrine' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 85-86, p. 85.
[78] It is important to acknowledge that the confession that Jesus died for our sin is not meant to isolate his death from the rest of Jesus' life or indeed from his resurrection. The whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus was for the forgiveness of our sin and for our reconciliation with God. The focus upon his death simply emphasises the comprehensive nature of the salvation won for us which extends even to the point of our deepest alienation. Seen in this light Hick's contention that Jesus' preaching about forgiveness *before* his death falsifies the notion that he *died* for our sin simply carries no weight. See Hick, *The Metaphor,* p. 127f. and his essay, 'Incarnation and Atonement: Evil and Incarnation' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 77-84, p. 77.

resemblance to both the Hegelian and the Romantic reinterpreters of Christian faith who were contemporary with Kierkegaard and who sought to go beyond the allegedly naive belief that an historical point of departure is decisive for salvation.

Kierkegaard's response to these attempts to fashion a second Christianity was simply to spell out the implications of the new Christianity as against the old and thereby to make clear the logical incompatibility between the two. The fundamental issue at stake is whether the manner of God's relation to humankind is to be accounted for with reference to something outside the individual in history or to something within the individual like reason (Hegel), feeling (Schleiermacher) or moral awareness (Kant). In the course of deliberations Kierkegaard was able to demonstrate that the 'advance' proposed for Christianity under the condition of Rationalist or Romantic ideals looks, as Stephen Evans has put it, suspiciously like a return to Socrates and Greek modes of thought.[79] This does not, of course, render the proposed second Christianity illegitimate or untrue but it does bring some clarity to the choice which Hick urges us to make. By exposing the Greek roots of such calls for revision, Kierkegaard falsifies the claim, made frequently by Hick, that a second Christianity is forced upon us by the superior methodological strategies of the modern age. The dispute over the incarnation has never been separable from the debate about how one may properly come to an understanding of who Jesus is and the alternatives have been present with us throughout Christian history.

It is for this reason that any successful, that is to say, truthful understanding of reality is contingent upon an epistemology which is appropriate to the object being considered. Kierkegaard, as we have seen, contends that in respect of Jesus of Nazareth the decisive epistemological condition is faith. Neither philosophy, nor mythology (the exercise of the poetic imagination) nor historical investigation, he suggests, are adequate to the task. John Hick, on the other hand, uncritically presumes that they are. There isn't any way of testing the legitimacy of these rival claims to authority except by adopting one or the other, for both adhere to a criterion of truth whose claim upon our allegiance cannot be demonstrated. The one criterion is Jesus himself whom faith confesses to be the Word of God. The other is human reason. Of course there is no *a priori* reason why the Logos of God and the human logos should be supposed to be in opposition but attentiveness to the Word of God disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth is enough for many to believe that they are.[80]

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[79] Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 169.

[80] This particular expression of the point is owed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's discussion of Christ as the counter-logos in his *Christology* (London: Collins 1966).

A post-modern venture

The Metaphor of God Incarnate is a typically modernist approach to Christology, uncomfortable with the doctrine of the incarnation on historical, biblical and 'scientific' grounds, and preferring instead an exemplarist christology in which the life and teaching of Jesus, purged of implausible theological or supernatural elements, constitutes worthy guidance for a pattern of human behaviour approved by God. Epistemologically impoverished though this project might be, modernism does seek to tell the truth about Jesus and still pursues a picture of the man from Nazareth 'as he really was'. It is the retention of such concerns which decisively distinguishes the modernists from their post-modern successors to whom we now turn.

In 1993, the same year in which John Hick produced *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, William Hamilton's *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus* appeared from the same publisher.[81] As the title suggests and the contents make explicit, Hamilton is not much interested in Jesus 'as he really was' and has little overt concern to tell the truth.[82] Hamilton invites us instead into the realm of fiction which is not, as it turns out, to be distinguished from some equally accessible realm of non-fiction but is rather to be recognised and approved, at least in the field of christology, as the only realm there is. Thus Hamilton's concern, as he tells us himself, is with 'how what I am calling 'the poets'... have portrayed Jesus in our century...'[83] These portrayals, Hamilton advises, carry much more of interest and significance than the increasingly 'irrelevant' portrayals of the theologians and the historians. 'My poets will turn out to be', Hamilton continues, 'inside, outside, and partly inside and partly outside [the Christian] tradition, and thus they may help me define the way I may be inside, outside or partly in and partly out. I will be asking the poets to help me locate a place that is beyond belief, neither belief nor unbelief.'[84] It is too early to decide upon what resemblance Hamilton bears to the contemporaries of Kierkegaard who also thought to 'go further' than faith but the possibility of resemblance is worth bearing in mind and is a matter to which we shall return. It is clear, however, that Hamilton wants to be free of a Christian faith in which an historical point of departure has decisive significance. He does not want faith to turn

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81 William Hamilton, *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press 1993). Hereafter cited as *Quest.*

82 The irony of every post-modern dismissal of 'truth' is of course, the accompanying commitment to the truth that there is no truth. The irony, or rather the confusion, is not one which many post-modernists have cared to contemplate.

83 Hamilton, *Quest,* p. 1.

84 Ibid.

upon the truth or falsity of the God's appearance in time but rather urges us 'to relinquish our anxiety about historicity, and begin to separate judgements of importance from judgements of historicity.'[85] It is true, as we have seen, that Kierkegaard has often been portrayed as one who is careless of history; Hamilton himself appeals to Kierkegaard for support,[86] but Climacus' account of the necessary conditions for conversion, to which, we have argued, Kierkegaard himself consents, claims decisive significance for the appearance of 'the god' in time and entails nothing like the dismissal of historicity which Hamilton and others espouse. Hamilton himself is not entirely sceptical about what can be recovered of the life of Jesus through the utilisation of historical-critical tools. Indeed he talks of a consensus to which he himself assents, but he further contends that 'what we know [about Jesus] is of little use to us in the late twentieth century'[87] The alternative then, for those who still wish to share in the inheritance of Jesus' good name, is to follow the poets in constructing fictions of Jesus which may somehow satisfy our 'spiritual needs'. This, Hamilton now informs us, is all that Christianity has ever been about:

> The theologians and the historians can offer neither a convincing Jesus of history nor Christ of faith. The Gospels are not a mixture and interpretation that our wisdom can distinguish. They are, in fact, fictional or ideological portraits designed to meet need, to stimulate imagination, intelligence and action. It is time to turn from theological earnestness to the poet's play.[88]

Not merely a second but also a third, fourth and fifth Christianity are in this manner to be welcomed and approved. Before turning himself to 'the poet's play', however, Hamilton pauses to consider three efforts at 'theological earnestness' two of which share Hamilton's post-theistic framework and one which doesn't. These are, in the first group, the christologies of Graham Shaw and Jens Glebe-Möller and in the second the christologies of the Latin American Liberation theologians. Hamilton observes, in these works, an emphasis upon the suffering and crucified Jesus who repudiates all power and privilege and gives comfort to the oppressed. This Jesus may be an inspiration to those who still seek to follow him but Hamilton is critical of the Liberation theologians in particular who imagine that this Jesus is the Jesus who 'really was'. His own verdict is that these theologies too are constructions which serve a present need but they undermine their own value by supposing themselves to be offering a 'true' account of the man of

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85 Ibid. p. 20.
86 Ibid. p. 19.
87 Ibid. p. 19.
88 Ibid. p. 22.

Nazareth.[89]

Such 'earnestness' dismissed, Hamilton then moves to the main concern of his book, namely, a consideration of recent literary constructions of Jesus. 'If all is fiction and ideology', he says, 'then we ought to look more favourably... upon those who have written about Jesus knowing they were doing fiction.'[90] What follows is an extensive survey of novelists, playwrights, journalists and poets all of whom, whether 'from inside or outside' Christian faith or 'partly inside or out', have turned their poetic (constructive) skill to the person of Jesus and sought to render him significant for their own place and time. It is questionable, of course, whether the authors whom Hamilton utilises in support of his project would approve of being used in this way. It is not at all clear, for example, that the selected poets are as careless of historical concerns as Hamilton professes to be. It is legitimate to ask, therefore, whether Hamilton's post-modern disregard for inherent meaning is a violation of what the authors themselves intend.

We need not repeat here the detailed study of individual authors which Hamilton offers, but will instead consider his overarching concern to legitimate whatever 'Christ' we choose. Commenting on what he regards as 'The Americanization of Jesus' in the work of Bruce Barton (*The Man Nobody Knows,* 1925) Hamilton asks, 'If Jesus could be a community organizer in the 1960's [M.Kamel Hussein, *City of Wrong; A Friday in Jerusalem,* 1966], and an anti-Roman agitator in the 1980's [Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean,* 1987], why not a businessman in the 1920's?'[91] While one senses the question may be asked with tongue in cheek — Hamilton apparently doubts that such portraits will satisfy us — it is nevertheless the case that for Hamilton there isn't any reason why they should be rejected. Such fictions may not be to our own taste — presumably not all Jesus fictions will cater to our spiritual needs — but that is all that can be said.[92] In this context questions of truth and falsity simply have no place. This is

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[89] Hamilton's treatment of the Liberation theologians is not without serious distortions. He alleges, for example, that to be a Liberation theologian it is a help to believe that an authentic Jesus behind the 'distortions' of Chalcedon and Nicea and even behind the evangelists is still recoverable (p. 49). Contrary to Hamilton's caricature it is almost universally agreed by Liberation theologians that the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon remain normative for Christian faith. See, for example, Leonardo Boff who claims that the christological confessions of Nicaea 'are binding on all Christians'. *Trinity and Society,* trans. Paul Burns (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates 1988) p. 49.

[90] Hamilton, *Quest,* p. 73.

[91] Ibid. p. 147.

[92] Hamilton is frequently critical of the Anti-semitic tendencies he claims to detect in many of the authors he studies but if the only criteria for theological legitimacy is 'what satisfies us' then he has no basis to press his objection upon others. The ethical impotence of post-modernism is not least among the reasons why post-modernism should be opposed.

subjectivity approved for its own sake rather than in the Climacean manner where subjectivity is approved as the proper relation of human beings to that which is given to be known in Jesus Christ.[93]

With Hamilton's disinterest in the historicity of Jesus it is inevitable that the focus of attention shifts from Jesus himself to the authors responsible for the various fictions. Decisive now, for the new 'Christianities' which are being created, are the personal situations of the individual authors. 'We make Jesus as our needs require', Hamilton proclaims, 'and in turn we may become — if we are lucky [sic] - like the Jesuses we make.'[94] Jesus fictions tell us little or nothing about Jesus and a great deal about those who create them. Thus, for example, we find Hamilton commenting on a passage in A. N. Wilson's *Jesus,* 'This is Wilson's Jesus in his finest hour. This is the Jesus Wilson found. Is it also Wilson?'[95] Or again he says of François Mauriac's *Life of Jesus,* 'Mauriac's portrait of Jesus is dominated, and I would say vitiated, by his own [Mauriac's] hatred of the flesh.'[96] Of Shusako Endo's *A Life of Jesus* Hamilton comments, 'This alienated Jesus is partly the classic existentialist hero of the past, and partly Endo himself, passionate and troubled Catholic fish in Japan's alien waters.'[97] Many more examples could be given. My point, however, is not that such observations and questions are necessarily mistaken but that they are the only questions Hamilton is concerned to ask. Jesus himself becomes a vanishing point, an occasion stimulating the author's productivity but without enduring significance. That, we have learned from Kierkegaard, is a characteristic mark of the Socratic. This does not, of course, make the approach wrong but it does distinguish it from that which may legitimately be called Christian.

Hamilton concludes his book with a fiction of his own. Walking along the beach at dawn he imagines himself met by a stranger who engages him in conversation about the 'theology' which we have seen presented in the book. This stranger turns out to be 'Jesus' — a more convinced post-modern than Hamilton purports to be himself. The conversation is predictable, offering confirmation from 'Jesus' himself of all that Hamilton wants us to believe. Thus Hamilton asks, 'Everyone who has written you up

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93 We shall return to Climacus' discussion of subjectivity and truth in the following chapter.

94 Hamilton, *Quest,* p. 195. Comments like this one, as the approach of Hamilton's whole book, render completely unconvincing his concluding assertion that 'Jesus fictions say something about the authors, about the readers, *and about Jesus*' (My Italics). I have no doubt that many of the authors whom Hamilton studies were attempting to say something about Jesus but Hamilton himself shows no interest in what that might be.

95 Hamilton, *Quest,* p. 183.

96 Ibid. p. 189.

97 Ibid. p. 191.

— even the Gospel writers in the beginning — has come up with a deeply self-interested portrait that suspiciously resembles the author. Is that all there is?' To which 'Jesus' replies,

> I may be able to help in answering the problem, though your touching confidence that there is something somewhere — out there or in here — that 'really' is the case may be a problem. But before we play with your question, I have a question for you. You see, two things have to happen: you are asking for something from me, but I also need something from you. Who is it that is asking this question?'[98]

The 'Jesus' Hamilton meets continues in this vein, resisting all attempts to locate meaning or truth in his own person and reflecting Hamilton's probings back to the inquirer himself. Thus he advises,

> You still take the Bible far too seriously as a source of reliable historical information. Just as there is no 'me as I really was', so there is no certain sense of the meaning of the Gospels. They simply do not deliver my inner meaning, whatever that means. Their stories are fictions; all the stories about me are, even those that pretend to be histories.[99]

Finally answering Hamilton's question, 'Jesus' says,

> Fiction is all you have, and you must be playful, not earnest, with fiction. They teach as art teaches, not history. In part what you get from fiction is what you bring: your own passion and sorrow and need. If your century (or the next) manages to move beyond history to literature as its key to the New Testament, it will be a worthy achievement indeed.[100]

We asked at the beginning of our discussion of Hamilton's book about the extent to which his concern to move beyond belief to a place of neither unbelief nor belief resembled the attempts of Kierkegaard's contemporaries to 'go further' than faith. As we have seen, the contemporaries of Kierkegaard variously adopted both Idealist and Romantic strategies for avoiding or rendering innocuous what Kierkegaard and some of his pseudonyms called the offense of the God-Man. Hamilton's work shows fundamental resemblances to both. In the passage just cited, Hamilton has Jesus recommending that authentic Christianity be fashioned from the imaginings of the poets. It is imagination, not history and certainly not the particular history of Jesus, that will transform us. The task is to fashion a 'Jesus' according to our needs and then to shape

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98 Ibid. p. 276.
99 Ibid. p. 282.
100 Ibid.

ourselves after the pattern thus created. In this way Hamilton's project conforms precisely to that of the Romantic poets who drew Kierkegaard's critique in chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments.*

The problem with the poetic reconstruction of Christianity, in Kierkegaard's view, is precisely its propensity to fictionalise. Far from being the virtue Hamilton makes it out to be, Kierkegaard alleges that poetic fabrication is an escape from actuality; it is the avoidance of that which is given for the sake of an egocentric shaping of the world according to one's own perceived needs and aspirations. Hamilton is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that theological consideration of Jesus of Nazareth is never entirely free from such egotism but, where recognised, it is surely to be repented of rather than acclaimed. A Christian poetry, on the other hand, as Kierkegaard himself endeavoured to provide, turns attention away from its own aesthetic reality to the form of the God-Man. In witness to him rather than to the personal situation of the author and with trust that God himself will side with the witness of faith, poetry may, forsaking fiction, be pressed into the service of the Truth.

We have noted in Hamilton's work, a dismissal of attempts to discover 'the Jesus who really was'. At face value this may be read as a Kierkegaardian suspicion of the objectivising tendency in historical-critical scholarship which proposes that personal interests and theological commitments must be set aside in order to tell the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. Hamilton shares with Kierkegaard the recognition that no position of neutrality exists. But beyond this genuine insight of post-modernism Hamilton and Kierkegaard have very little in common. Where Kierkegaard declares that the only truthful relationship between the individual and the reality of the God-Man is a deeply personal one - the relation of a disciple to her Saviour and Lord, Hamilton proposes that we abandon all thought of such a relationship, 'a debilitating dependence' as he calls it,[101] and trust instead in the (saving?) value of our own insight and creativity. Towards the end of his imagined conversation with 'Jesus' Hamilton confesses, 'You have almost persuaded me that what I have found was something I already had.'[102] This is, of course, a precise statement of Socrates' doctrine of anamnesis to which Hamilton is much more committed than the cited acknowledgment reveals. The relation between teacher and learner is of merely incidental significance and Jesus is made an *object* at human disposal, a mere cipher for whatever native capacity or sensitivity we deem to be of value. Ironically the christological recommendations of William Hamilton,

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101 Ibid. p. 287.
102 Ibid.

characterised by the complete abandonment of history, produce a Jesus equally remote and impotent as the Jesus offered by the most sceptical of historical-critical inquirers. It is thus Kierkegaard rather than Hamilton who provides the genuine and Christian alternative to the objectivising tendency of historical-critical research.

Throughout our discussions of Hamilton's work it has been my contention that he displays many of the characteristics of post-modernism. It is important to note therefore that Hamilton himself denies being a post-modernist. Or more accurately, he 'suspects' that he 'is too old to be one'.[103] Perhaps his doubts about eligibility will be laid to rest by the blurb on the back cover of his book which confidently asserts that '*A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus* seems set to become a post-modern classic...' In any event there is an ironical but no doubt unintentional poignancy that a post-modernist should deny *being* one. Such ascriptions are more appropriately bestowed by others who believe that the reference of words have particular loci.

Hamilton is similarly elusive in respect of semantic definition in general. He is of course aware of the post-modern debates about language and claims to side with Alice in the following passage from Lewis Carroll:

> 'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many things.'
>
> 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all'.
>
> — *Through the Looking-Glass,* Ch. VI[104]

His confessed allegiance to Alice notwithstanding, there is abundant evidence on every other page of his book that in respect of the name 'Jesus' Hamilton is prepared to offer *carte blanche* to the poets encouraging them to make of it whatever they will. The issue that has concerned us in this chapter is whether 'Christianity' is similarly open to as many interpretations as we choose.

For Kierkegaard, the definition of what it is to be a Christian is given to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, be it noted, is distinct from and is always the corrective of our best efforts to bear witness to and articulate the meaning to be found in him.

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[103] Ibid. p. 16.
[104] Cited by Hamilton, Ibid. p. 10.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's faith is founded upon the realisation that God gives himself to be known in Jesus and his self-revelation is a revelation in which we can trust. Hick and Hamilton, on the other hand, are representative of those who believe that the definition of what it is to be a Christian rests in our hands. At the level of thought there is nothing to compel allegiance to one alternative over the other. At the level of existence, however, Jesus of Nazareth goes his way among us and patiently invites belief.

Either/Or

It was Kierkegaard's diagnosis of Christendom that Christianity and sensibleness had 'come to an understanding with one another'.[105] While the culture of Christendom is now on the wane there remain those who seek an accommodation of Christianity to the wisdom of the world, to render it plausible according to the prevailing standards of rationality, to adapt it into something which can be believed and thereby to remove the offense which it otherwise represents. In the face of such efforts, Kierkegaard's analysis continues to be apposite:

> But take away the possibility of offense... and all Christianity becomes direct communication, and then Christianity is abolished, has become something easy, a superficial something that neither wounds nor heals deeply enough; it has become the false invention of purely human compassion that forgets the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.[106]

If the infinite qualitative difference is not to be forgotten then we have need of both an epistemology and a soteriology which rests, not upon human capacity but upon the gracious self-disclosure of God. That just such a disclosure has taken place in Jesus of Nazareth continues to be the central confession of authentic Christian faith and stands in constant need of distinction from a 'second Christianity' in which everything is again Socratic.[107]

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105 Kierkegaard offers an extended discussion of this theme in his discourse, 'Christ as the Prototype' which appears in *Judge for Yourself!*

106 *Practice in Christianity*, p. 140.

107 Responding to the claims of The *Myth of God Incarnate,* Stephen Evans has argued persuasively that a revision of Christianity along the lines advocated should not properly be called Christianity. His point, taken directly from Kierkegaard is that in the interests of clear communication the same term ought not to be used for the naming of contradictory positions. See Evans, 'Mis-using Religious Language: Something about Kierkegaard and "The Myth of God Incarnate"' *Religious Studies* 15 (1979) 139-157. Evans' observations remains apposite in respect of Hick's latest considerations of the doctrine of the incarnation.

8

SUBJECTIVITY IS TRUTH... YET BEGINS IN ERROR

Philosophical Fragments begins with the question of Meno: 'Can the Truth be learned?' Johannes Climacus, the author of the *Fragments*, gives an affirmative response to the question but his proposal for *how* the Truth may be learned stands in sharp contrast to the Rationalist, the Idealist and the Romantic strategies which continue to be recommended by the Western philosophical tradition. The fundamental issue dividing Climacus from this Western tradition concerns the condition which makes apprehension of the Truth possible. Where the tradition has looked to some human capacity, be it reason or imagination or memory, Climacus proposes, or rather, confesses, that the condition for learning the Truth is faith, an unmerited and entirely gratuitous gift from God. This being so, we have attempted in the foregoing chapters to show that learning the Truth, the Christian Truth about God and about ourselves, is not an evolutionary process depending crucially upon the epistemological resources which we bring to the task, but is rather a revolution which redemptively transforms us in our alienation and brings us to an unfinished yet sure relation to the Truth. Following the New Testament, Climacus calls this revolution *Omvendelse* (*metanoia*), and likens it to a new birth. We have argued that this process bears resemblance, though not in every respect, to cognitive revolutions in other fields.

Learning the Truth , according to Climacus' alternative, is not a matter of assenting to a series of propositions but of existing before God. More particularly, it is a matter of existing in a relation of contemporaneity with the God who is disclosed to us in Jesus Christ. Release from the bondage of untruth, therefore, is not a matter of detached objectivity but of passionate subjectivity and it rests, not upon the exercise of one's own skill but rather upon being forgiven. This is a matter which has everything to do with the personal situation of the individual and remains opaque to those who consider personal detachment to be an epistemological virtue. Learning the Truth, and here again we speak of the Truth which is in Christ Jesus, demands a willingness to let go of one's allegiance to the logic of public sanity and to trust oneself to a Logos which lays bare our existence in untruth yet offers the renewal of our minds.

Supremely in the case of Christian faith, Truth is not a mere form of words but is a form of life lived in the company of Jesus. 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord", says Jesus, 'will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21). Climacus expresses the matter in epistemological terms when he observes that 'the difference is simply that science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way, whereas Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, that is, truly to become a subject.'[1] Notoriously, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'* Johannes Climacus claims that 'subjectivity is truth'. This suggestion has gained the status of a 'proof text' for those many commentators who find in Kierkegaard an irrationalism and a relativism which incorrigibly betrays the truth. The charges are apparently given further weight by Kierkegaard's own concern to find a truth which is 'true for me'. This concern has a distinctly post-modern ring and has in fact been welcomed by those who advocate a non-realist understanding of personal truth claims.[2] I shall attempt to show, however, as ought by now to be obvious, that both Climacus and Kierkegaard himself are insistent that the Truth, far from being a human fabrication, is a gift which is given by God.

'Subjectivity is Truth'

That the Truth is given by God entails the distinctive account of how one learns the Truth given by Climacus in the *Fragments.* In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* however, Climacus' way to the Truth is given a notoriously troublesome formulation. Here Climacus contends that one learns the Truth by becoming subjective. Let us consider what is involved in this claim. The relevant section of the *Postscript* begins with a discussion of empiricism and idealism both of which theories consider truth to be the conformity of thought and being. The former defines truth as the agreement of thought with being while the latter defines it as the agreement of being with thought. In assessing the rival claims of idealism and empiricism 'the point in each case', says Climacus, 'is to pay scrupulous attention to what is understood by being and also to pay attention to whether the knowing human spirit might not be lured out into the indefinite and fantastically become something such as no *existing* human being has ever been or can

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[1] *Postscript,* p. 117.

[2] The anti-realist religious philosophy of Don Cupitt is a notable case in point. As noted earlier Cupitt quite wrongly alleges that Kierkegaard's position 'precludes objectivity in faith'. *The Sea of Faith,* p. 152f. As we shall demonstrate in this chapter, Walter Lowrie is much closer to the truth in claiming that Kierkegaard's insistence upon subjectivity 'meant, not a disposition to ignore facts but a vital concern about them — especially about the facts which most properly concern man.' *Kierkegaard* (London: Oxford University Press 1938) p. 302.

be...'[3]

Two problems, Climacus thinks, attend the respective accounts of what constitutes epistemic success and threaten to 'dissolve the entire endeavour into a tautology within a rash, fantastical venture.'[4] The first problem concerns being itself, which if we are talking about empirical being is not the static, finished object which empiricism and idealism make it out to be, but rather a process of becoming which can never be 'pinned down'. The second difficulty is that of the elusiveness of a standpoint from which to judge the conformity between being and thought. Judgement is itself a process of thought such that whoever purports to judge cannot abstract themselves from their own thinking, cannot view the relation *sub specie aeterni*. Climacus comments: 'If the existing person could actually be outside himself, the truth would be something concluded for him. But where is this point?'[5] All thinking and knowing requires such a point; it is located within a paradigm to recall our earlier discussion, but the notion that such a point is available objectively, that is to say, in abstraction from one's own existence, is a 'mirage'. Such a point or paradigm may be given only through an act of inwardness and resolution, only by virtue of faith. Thus Climacus writes,

> If, in the two definitions given, being [*Væren*] is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a *desideratum* [something wanted] and everything is placed in the process of becoming [*Vorden*], because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming. Thus truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power. On the other hand, every beginning, when it is *made* (if it is not arbitrariness by not being conscious of this), does not occur by virtue of immanental thinking but is *made* by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith.[6]

It may well be the case that truth involves the conformity of thought and being, indeed 'it is actually that way for God'[7], but for an existing spirit who is participant in the process of becoming, truth claims can only be approximations, provisional attempts to comprehend which are always founded upon faith. The speculative ideal of a truth claim which is independent of the faith commitments of an existing spirit is attainable only at the level of analytic truths and these, as Kierkegaard tirelessly points out, have nothing to

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3 *Postscript*, p. 189.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid. p. 197.
6 Ibid. p. 189.
7 Ibid. p. 190.

do with existence. Claims to any other kind of truth, and these are designated 'essential truths' by Kierkegaard, involve faith. To make such a claim is a matter of 'appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity'.[8] Thus Climacus' contention that subjectivity is truth cannot be interpreted along post-modern lines to mean that the truth is merely what we believe in. The formulation is rather designed to communicate the fact that any truth claim pertaining to existence already rests on subjectivity. Subjectivity is a *conditio sine qua non* of the human relation to truth. It is not, however, its guarantee. Subjective commitments are not infallible, as we shall consider further below. Indeed they may just as well characterise a relation of the individual to something which is untrue. But,

> *When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.*[9]

The point is simply that wherever a commitment is made, wherever the existing spirit 'ventures out over the seventy thousand fathoms of water', that at least is true. Why? Because in this way the 'how' is appropriate to the limitations of human existence.

The theological situation

Climacus proceeds to consider the knowledge of God as an example. He is well aware, of course, given the infinite qualitative difference between God and the existing individual, that theological knowledge might warrant special consideration but for the moment at least he is prepared to proceed under the assumption of his speculative age that it doesn't. He proposes to show, however, that the objectivist project in theology is fundamentally flawed. He begins:

> Objectively, what is reflected upon is that this is the true God; subjectively, that the individual relates himself to a something *in such a way* that the relation is in truth a God-relation. Now, on which side is the truth?[10]

Later, in an oft-cited passage, Climacus gives the following answer:

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[8] Ibid. p. 192.
[9] *Postscript,* p. 199.
[10] *Postscript,* p. 199.

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol — where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshiping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol.

The first worshipper, although having an idea of the true God, is idolatrous precisely because he worships as though God were an object at his disposal, 'something to be taken along at his convenience'. The other commits no such sin for he realises that God is to be taken along '*a tout prix* [at any price], which, in passion's understanding, is the true relationship of inwardness with God.'[11] The point of this example is clearly not the elevation of the idol to the status of the true God such that the truth is simply *what* we believe in with sufficient passion. Yet this is a common interpretation expressed, for example, by W. T. Jones who claims that for Kierkegaard, 'the belief of a Hindu that Vishnu is God, the belief of a Mohammedan that Allah is God, the belief of a Nuer that *kwoth* is God — even the belief of an atheist that there is no God — are all true; providing only that in each of these beliefs an objective uncertainty is embraced with passionate intensity.'[12] For Climacus, however, the status of the idol, though worshipped in truth, remains unchanged. That particular 'what' continues to be false. All that is approved is the 'how' of the worshipper who knows that God cannot be treated as a commodity from whom the distance of objectivity may be maintained.

Climacus' example is reminiscent of the story Jesus tells of two men who went up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The first was a pharisee who trusted in his own righteousness while the second was a tax collector who knelt before God and asked forgiveness for his sin. Intending the allusion, Climacus means us to see that to approach God while trusting in one's objective grasp of God, trusting, in other words, in one's own intellectual prowess, bears all the marks of self-righteousness. Jesus' verdict upon the situation was that it was the tax-collector and not the pharisee who went away justified.

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[11] *Postscript,* p. 200.

[12] W. T. Jones, *Kant to Wittgenstein and Sartre,* 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1969) p. 228. I owe the reference to C. S. Evans. Similar allegations against Kierkegaard are made by Brand Blanshard who contends that Kierkegaard's notion that subjectivity is truth 'implies that there are no common truths for Christians to accept, no common principles by which their lives may be guided, indeed no common Deity for them to contemplate and worship.' See Blanshard, 'Kierkegaard on Faith', p. 15.

To speak of justification in the context of a discussion on truth may seem to indicate a substantial departure from our original concern with epistemology and the correspondence between being and thought. But the modern epistemological project, beginning with Descartes, has always insisted upon an inseparable relationship between justification and truth. It has not usually conceived, however, of the need for the *individual* to be justified but has rather been concerned with the means by which the truth is to be justified to the individual. This is precisely the task that we have seen John Hick attempting in the previous chapter. Christian theology, in contrast, recognises that the human subject stands in need of justification before the Truth.[13] At this point Climacus' conception of the relationship between subjectivity and truth takes a surprising turn — surprising that is, if one has come to Climacus by way of the voluminous scholarly literature on the subject. For he now makes a claim which many commentators have simply overlooked. Echoing the theme of the *Fragments,* Climacus in the *Postscript* writes, 'in wanting to become truth by becoming subjective, subjectivity is in the predicament of being untruth'.[14] That predicament, Climacus now reminds us, is the individual's existence in *sin.* In further reiteration of the *Fragments* Climacus continues,

> Viewed eternally, [the individual] cannot be in sin or be presupposed to have been eternally in sin. Therefore, by coming into existence (for the beginning was that subjectivity is untruth), he becomes a sinner. He is not born as a sinner in the sense that he is presupposed to be a sinner before he is born, but he is born in sin and as a sinner. Indeed we could call this *hereditary sin.* But if existence has in this way obtained power over him, he is prevented from taking himself back into eternity through recollection.[15]

What sin prevents, however, — the reconciliation of the individual with the Truth — God has accomplished. Paradoxical though it may appear, the eternal Truth has come into existence in time, rendering inappropriate the effort of speculative thought to justify the Truth before human beings. 'Existence', says Climacus, 'can never be accentuated more sharply than it has been here. The fraud of speculative thought in wanting to recollect itself out of existence has been made impossible. This is the only point to be comprehended here, and every speculation that insists on being speculation shows *eo*

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13 The close relation in Climacus' discussion of subjectivity, between epistemology and soteriology has been pointed out by Stephen Evans who observes that Climacus 'is pointing to analogies between these two fields that most thinkers today do not see'. *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript,* p. 116.
14 *Postscript,* p. 185. Blanshard, Gottlieb, Hartshorne, Pojman and Schacht are among those who have offered extensive commentaries upon Climacus' treatment of subjectivity without apparently noticing that 'subjectivity is in the predicament of being untruth'. Exceptions to this general trend are provided by Evans, McLane and Sefler.
15 *Postscript,* p. 208.

ipso that it has not comprehended this.'[16] A *true* relation to the Truth, on the other hand, is aware of the objective uncertainty which characterises all 'accidental truths of history' and thus of the need for faith.

The content of faith

Kierkegaard's concern with subjectivity, with the 'how' of faith, is not a concern which is careless of the 'what'. Indeed it is precisely because of his passion for the truth that the question of method is so important. Only the most naive realist on the one hand, who thinks that the truth is self-evident, or the anti realist on the other who thinks that there is no truth, imagine that the 'how' is of no consequence. The rest of us, whether we be Cartesian or Kierkegaardian or anything else recognise that claims to knowledge must be undergirded by a 'discourse on method'. This is essentially the task which Johannes Climacus sets himself when he poses the question, 'How am I to become a Christian?' Being a Christian, with the truth claim implicit in such being, 'is defined not by the "what" of Christianity but by the "how" of the Christian'.[17] This 'how' we have already seen, is the story of the salvific encounter of God with the sinful, existing individual who, by virtue of the condition given by God, is reconciled to the Truth which is disclosed in Jesus Christ. But, Climacus continues, 'this "how" can fit only one thing, the absolute paradox.'[18] It is thus not the case that any subjectivity will do. Rather,

> ...*to have faith* is specifically qualified differently from all other appropriation and inwardness. Faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest. This formula fits only the one who has faith, no one else, not even a lover, or an enthusiast, or a thinker, but solely and only the one who has faith, who relates himself to the absolute paradox.[19]

Earl McLane interprets the passage to mean that 'it is the 'object' which ultimately satisfies the 'subjectivity is truth' principle'[20] and adduces in support of this

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16 *Postscript,* p. 209.
17 *Postscript,* p. 610f.
18 Ibid. The logic of Kierkegaard's position was to be spelled out by the dialectical theologians of the 1920's and 30's in terms of the inseparability of revelation and reconciliation. This theme pervades both Emil Brunner's *Revelation and Reason,* trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1946) p. 28, and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics.*
19 *Postscript,* p. 611. This passage supports Herbert Garelick's contention that subjectivity is not synonymous with Christianity but it also counts as evidence against Garelick's further suggestion that 'subjectivity, professed for its own sake, is the highest value in the *Postscript.*' See Garelick's *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard,* p. 63.
20 Earl McLane, 'Kierkegaard and Subjectivity' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8.4 (1977) 211-232.

interpretation the following passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals*.

> In all the usual talk that Johannes Climacus is mere subjectivity etc., it has been completely overlooked that in addition to all his other concretions he points out in one of the last sections that the remarkable thing is that there is a How with the characteristic that when the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, that is the How of 'faith'. Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown to be objectivity. And this, then, is a turning of the subjectivity-principle, which, as far as I know, has never before been carried through or accomplished in this way.[21]

It is simply not the case that Climacus, much less Kierkegaard himself, is careless of the distinction between truth and falsity or that he offers no means of distinguishing between them.[22] Clearly for Kierkegaard, Jesus Christ is the Truth and he is also the Judge who lays bare that which is false and that which is true. There is no guarantee of course, that human beings in their sinfulness will apprehend him aright but faith confesses that in seeking for the Truth we must begin with attentiveness to him. Such attentiveness is a commitment without reserve to the Truth which is in Christ Jesus. The question Kierkegaard poses is whether we shall make such a commitment or whether we shall instead commit ourselves without reserve to the philosophy or the mythology which is of our own making. Athanasius pointed out as long ago as the fourth century that in theology at least the latter choice is to be regarded as *mania*.[23]

Avoiding relativism

Although it is not the case, as we have seen, that the Climacean understanding of how one learns the truth, reposes on a relativist notion of truth, Climacus and indeed Kierkegaard himself, have nevertheless been subjected to the charge by numerous commentators. The concern is not that Kierkegaard admits to no absolute truth; his critics readily acknowledge that Kierkegaard's entire corpus was an attempt to show the inadequacy and indeed the untruthfulness of those subjective commitments which he

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[21] *Journals*, 4/4550, X^2 A 299 (1849).

[22] Such is the complaint of Rudolph J. Gerber, for example, who alleges that 'Kierkegaard provides in the end no way to distinguish absurdity from nonsense.' See 'Kierkegaard, Reason and Faith' *Thought* 44 (1969) 29-52, p. 52. Apart from Gerber's failure to recognise that the category of absurdity belongs to the pseudonymous appraisal of Christianity his complaint assumes the availability of some neutral ground on the basis of which the relative veracity of various faith commitments can be discerned. It has been the project of Kierkegaard's entire authorship to show that this post-Enlightenment assumption is no longer tenable.

[23] See Athanasius' Letters to Serapion. Cited by T. F. Torrance in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press 1965) p. 35.

described as the aesthetic, the ethical and the pagan religious and to recommend instead the Truth which he believed could be found in Christianity. The concern is rather that the truth he affirms, the truth of God's presence among us in Jesus Christ, is not publicly demonstrable. The very particular 'how' which is developed in his works imposes a ban upon the objective quest for Truth, which alone in Kierkegaard's time, was thought to constitute a safeguard against wild flights of fancy. Thus Climacus acknowledges,

> ...the objective way is of the opinion that it has a security that the subjective way does not have (of course, existence, what it means to exist, and objective security cannot be thought together). It is of the opinion that it avoids a danger that lies in wait for the subjective way, and at its maximum this danger is madness.[24]

Climacus responds, however, not by denying the danger, but by pointing to a 'more inhuman' madness into which the objective approach so easily falls but which is commonly overlooked. Thus, for example, 'when an assistant professor... says *de omnibus dubitandum est* [everything must be doubted] and briskly writes away on a system in which there is sufficient internal evidence in every other sentence that the man has never doubted anything — he is not considered lunatic.' The lunacy Climacus fears most is not the lunacy of the person who misplaces her faith, who is absolutely committed to that which is only a relative end. He rather fears the hypocrisy of the person who proclaims one thing while doing another. In Climacus' view such hypocrisy cannot be avoided by the person who, though claiming to view the world *sub specie aeterni,* is nevertheless an existing individual. Commenting on the two forms of lunatic he writes,

> One shrinks from looking the first one in the eye, lest one discover the depth of his frantic state, but one does not dare to look at the other at all for fear of discovering that he does not have proper eyes but glass eyes and hair made from a floor mat, in short, that he is an artificial product... One does not know whether one dares to believe it is a human being with whom one is speaking, or perhaps a 'walking stick... to get into a rational and speculative conversation with a walking stick — now that is almost enough to drive one crazy.[25]

As usual Kierkegaard's wit strikes at the heart of his opponent's weakness but Kierkegaard himself did not imagine that clever rhetoric, apt though it may be, absolved him from the responsibility of thinking through the implications and possible problems of his own position. Behind the charge of relativism levelled at him by contemporary critics

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24 *Postscript,* p. 194.
25 *Postscript,* p. 196.

is the serious problem of how a truth which can be known only through faith is to be communicated within a world of unbelief.

Communication and paradigms

Given the parallels drawn in chapter five between Kierkegaard's account of Christian conversion and Thomas Kuhn's description of the structure of scientific revolutions, it is not surprising to find this same concern about communication being expressed by critics of Kuhn. Karl Popper, for example, accuses Kuhn of relativism, not because Popper denies that our thinking takes place within conceptual frameworks, but because he thinks, in opposition to Kuhn, that 'a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible'. 'It is just a dogma', he continues, '— a dangerous dogma — that the different frameworks are like mutually untranslatable languages.'[26] Popper is concerned firstly, that communication between paradigms be an attainable goal and secondly, that our understanding of science allow for the critical evaluation of competing frameworks. Thus he writes, 'in science, as distinct from theology, a critical comparison of the competing theories, of the competing frameworks, is always possible. And the denial of this possibility is a mistake. In science (and only in science) can we say that we have made genuine progress: that we know more than we did before.'[27] We have already acknowledged that in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn's explanation of progress leaves us in doubt about how the claim to have progressed may be verified. Although we have already given attention to this concern as it is expressed by Nicholas Jardine, Karl Popper's similar objection is framed in a way which focuses, not upon the possibility of the reduction of one theory to another, as with Jardine, but upon whether or not inter-theoretic communication is possible. Thus Popper's objection highlights a problem with which Kierkegaard was passionately concerned.

Despite Popper's dismissive aside, theology too is concerned for both communication and epistemic progress. The declared concern of Kierkegaard's authorship to introduce Christianity into Christendom surely rests upon the assumption that both successful communication and epistemic progress are legitimate expectations for a Christian author. We shall attempt to show, therefore, that the paradigmatic constraints upon our knowing recognised by both Kierkegaard and Kuhn preclude neither.

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26 Karl Popper, 'Normal Science and its Dangers' *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, eds. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press 1970) 51-58, p. 56.
27 Ibid. p. 57.

Dealing first with the concern Popper expresses for the reliable identification of epistemic progress, Kuhn admits that 'in one sense of the term I may be a relativist' but adds that 'in a more essential one I am not'.[28] The sense in which Kuhn admits to being a relativist applies also to Kierkegaard. Both deny that our epistemic projects begin from some presuppositionless neutral ground which afford a view of the world *sub specie aeterni.* Kuhn, however, is not a relativist insofar as he denies that one scientific theory is as good as another for doing what scientists normally do.[29] In the same way Kierkegaard denies that the aesthetic, the ethical or the pagan-religious views of life can give access to the Truth which is disclosed in Christianity. Kuhn admits, however, that there are some situations in which he is wary of applying the label 'truth' and this, he suggests, is the reason for his critic's concern. The intra-theoretic uses of 'truth' present no particular problem for Kuhn. He readily agrees that 'members of a given scientific community will generally agree which consequences of a shared theory sustain the test of experiment and are therefore true, which are false as theory is currently applied, and which are as yet untested.' 'Nevertheless', he continues, 'there is another step, or kind of step, which many philosophers of science wish to take and which I refuse. They wish, that is, to compare theories as representations of nature, as statements about 'what really is out there'... they seek a sense in which [a theory] is a better approximation to the truth. I believe nothing of that sort can be found.'[30] Now this statement does indeed give cause for alarm, but only, I would suggest, if we deny Kuhn the opportunity to explain.[31] Kuhn's concern about inter-theoretic uses of 'truth' is founded upon his doubts about whether there exists a neutral language adequate to the comparison even of simple observations. Kuhn himself gives examples from philosophical and scientific discourse where such doubts would seem to be justified.[32] For our purposes a theological example will be more instructive. After the Okalahoma bombing of April 1995 which killed in excess of one hundred and fifty people, Bill Clinton, the president of the United States, proclaimed in an address to the nation that 'God is just and the perpetrators of this crime

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[28] Thomas Kuhn, 'Reflections on my Critics' *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge,* eds. Lakatos and Musgrave, 231-278, p. 264.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] As is the case with John Rodwell, for example, who thinks Kuhn's position to be rather congenial to the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate.* See Rodwell's 'Relativism in Science and Theology' *Incarnation and Myth,* ed. Goulder (1979) 214-223.

[32] In making this point Kuhn is supported by Paul Feyerabend who has argued that the empiricist notion of 'meaning invariance' is no longer tenable. In the change from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, for example, a change in the meaning of scientific terms takes place. In Newtonian physics, for instance, mass was an inherent and unchanging property of a body while in relativity theory mass is a property of the relationship between a body and a frame of reference and thus varies with changes in velocity relative to an observer. See Feyerabend's 'Problems of Empiricism' *Beyond the Edge of Certainty,* ed. R. Colodny (Lanham: University Press of America 1983) 145-260, pp. 168ff.

will be brought to justice.' He then went on to assure the people of America that 'we will seek the death penalty for these criminals'. The question to be asked, in support of Kuhn's uncertainty about inter-theoretical uses of 'truth', is whether the statement 'God is just' when uttered by President Clinton in this context can be said to be true? It is not so simple a matter, as Kierkegaard especially has reminded us, to ask about the objective truth of the claim. Rather it is clear from the context that the president means something by the claim which, 'Christianly understood', is untrue, namely that the justice of God demands punitive retribution. In the previous chapter we surveyed similar theological claims like 'Jesus is the Messiah' and 'Jesus is Lord' and found it necessary, when considering the veracity of such claims, to recognise that the standard of truthfulness was not the prevailing expectations of what the Messiah or the Lord would do. Consideration of the semantic intention of the professing subject, as also of the audience, are of the utmost importance here. Such examples certainly suggest that the communicative task is complex but neither Kierkegaard, in the case of Christianity, nor Kuhn, in the case of science, believe it to be impossible.

Although it is legitimate to challenge not only the neutrality of paradigms but also the neutrality of language it does appear at first glance, that such a challenge simply compounds the problem of communication and adds fuel to the fire which Popper claims to detect. If there cannot even be agreement on the meanings of words then competing thought worlds are radically incommensurable indeed. Kuhn, however, responds by claiming that not all language is subject to the kinds of ambiguity which we have adduced above. Speakers of a language share a great deal and usually have enough in common to be able to recognise and discuss cases of semantic ambiguity. The point being made by Kuhn at least, is that such discussion is very often required. Semantic agreement must be verified rather than assumed. This being so, there is more to knowing the truth than the recitation of objective propositions. In response to the criticisms of Karl Popper, therefore, Kuhn explains that,

> though they have no direct access to it, the stimuli to which the participants in a communication breakdown respond are, under pain of solipsism, the same. So is their general neural apparatus, however different the programming. Furthermore, except in a small, if all-important area of experience, the programming must be the same for the men involved share a history (except the immediate past), a language, an everyday world, and most of a scientific one. Given what they share, they can find out much about how they differ.[33]

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33 Kuhn, 'Reflections on My Critics' p. 276.

Kuhn is suggesting here that although competing scientific paradigms may be incommensurable — one cannot test the cogency of a paradigm without adopting its premises — there is nevertheless, significant overlap in the thought worlds of the participants in a communication breakdown. It is on the basis of this overlap that some communication is possible. With sufficient 'will, patience and tolerance of threatening ambiguity', scientists may attempt to elucidate their differences and learn to 'discover what the other would see and say when presented with a stimulus to which his visual and verbal response would be different.'[34] Such communication constitutes a 'preliminary step' forward, not, we should note, to a logical demonstration but rather toward conversion. Kuhn comments,

> Exploring an alternative theory by techniques like those outlined above, one is likely to find that one is already using it (as one suddenly notes that one is thinking in, not translating out of, a foreign language). At no point was one aware of having reached a decision, made a choice. That sort of change is, however, conversion, and the techniques which induce it may well be described as therapeutic, if only because, when they succeed, one learns one had been sick before. No wonder the techniques are resisted and the nature of the change disguised in later reports.[35]

Before shifting attention to Kierkegaard's communicative strategy it is as well to note again that Kuhn does not deny that truth is a function of the correlation between thought and being. We have already drawn attention to Kuhn's belief, somewhat unsubstantiated though it may be, that paradigm shifts in science represent progress in human understanding and enable 'a closer agreement between theory and fact'.[36] Like Kierkegaard, however, he challenges the notion that estimations of such agreement are unaffected by the personal thought world or paradigm of the estimator. Must we then despair of knowing the truth? I think not. But we must give up our presumption to omniscience and be ready to acknowledge the provisionality and partiality of any truth claims that we might make. Kuhn's concern about inter-theoretic claims to truth then, is the straightforward implication of Kierkegaard's recognition that human beings do not view the world *sub specie aeterni.* But none of this absolves us from the responsibility of going on, from doing our best to tell the truth that is true for us. The Christian communicator, however, goes on in the knowledge that the truth for us is ultimately determined by that which has been done for us in Christ.

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34 Kuhn, ibid. p. 277.
35 Ibid.
36 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 27.

As before, I do not wish to suggest that Christian conversion is in every respect just like the process of scientific conversion, nor that the strategies of scientific communication can simply be adopted by Christianity. Indeed there are significant differences in the communicative approaches recommended by Kuhn and by Kierkegaard respectively. But, also as before, there are points where comparison may be illuminating.

Kierkegaard's strategy of indirect communication

We have seen that Kuhn's approach to inter-theoretic communication rests on the supposition of a substantial linguistic and semantic overlap between paradigms. This overlap is not complete, however, since semantic shifts in some of the central terms are part of what constitutes the difference between paradigms. Such overlap as there is, however, enables participants in a communication breakdown to recognise where the differences lie. If we consider, for example, the Gestalt switch operative in the well known duck/rabbit figure, it is possible to offer to the person who cannot see the figure as a rabbit an intelligible account of what she must look for. The inquirer may then know what it is she is to look for but will not know what it is to see it. The example is comparable to the situation of Johannes Climacus who is aware of the truth claims Christianity makes but does not know what it is to be a Christian.

In considering how this mode of communication might function in the concrete situation of Christian witness we may simply return to the work of Kierkegaard himself. Kierkegaard's strategy in *Philosophical Fragments,* for example, is to begin with a philosophical position concerning which there is no semantic dispute. The Socratic doctrine of recollection is intelligible to both the Christian and to the Idealist. It constitutes a common ground from which to begin but it is emphatically not an apologetic *Anknüpfungspunkt.* The difference is that such common ground cannot be regarded as a premise or set of premises from which Christian claims may be derived. This is what the Idealist opponent already believes and Kierkegaard thinks him mistaken. But Kierkegaard also thinks it is a prerequisite of successful communication to begin 'by accepting the other man's illusion as good money'.[37] 'If real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position', he says, 'one must first of all take pains to find HIM where he is and begin there.'[38]

It will be Kierkegaard's strategy, however, to show that from such a starting point, only

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37 *Point of View,* p. 40.
38 Ibid. p. 27.

the very opposite of Christianity can result. The communicative intent is to present Christianity and Idealism in their stark dissimilarity, first of all to preclude his contemporaries from adopting Christianity under false pretences, but then with the hope that they will enter truly into a relation with the Truth. 'Indirect communication', as Kierkegaard calls such an approach, 'is a placing together of dialectical contrasts — and then not a single word of personal understanding... Indirect communication is sheer tension.'[39] No attempt to coerce can be made.[40] Confronted with radically divergent alternatives the tension for the inquirer is the tension of personal decision. The communicator seeks, through her efforts, only to get it clear where the real divergence between competing life-views lies. Kierkegaard here approves the maieutic pedagogical method recommended by Socrates: 'Between one human being and another μαιευεσθαι [to deliver] is the highest.'[41]

Like Kuhn's account of inter-theoretic communication in science, Kierkegaard's approach depends upon a sufficient linguistic and semantic overlap between paradigms, or between faith and unbelief, to execute the task described thus far. In both cases any direct communication involving both the assumption of commensurability between paradigms and 'the presupposition that the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed'[42] can result only in a compromise of that which is to be conveyed. Two features of the theological situation, however, both of which have been discussed in earlier chapters, distinguish the Christian from the scientific task of communication. Firstly, the 'disturbance' to the receiver's ability to receive is understood in Christian terms as sin. The disturbance is a self-inflicted alienation from the 'object' of epistemic concern. The second distinguishing feature is that in science the object under investigation is indifferent to the situation of the inquirer. This is not the case in theology where epistemic progress reposes upon God's being as love. The first feature requires that human beings be *saved* from their plight while the second is the basis upon which salvation is achieved. For the communication of Christian Truth both features combine to render the communication utterly dependent upon God. To his approval of Socrates' maieutic method, Climacus adds the proviso: 'giving birth indeed belongs to the God'.[43]

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39 *Journals*, 1/679, X^3 A 624 (1850).

40 Kierkegaard notes in *On Authority and Revelation* that if the apostle were to use force in the propagation of his message 'he would have defined his effort as essentially identical with that of other men.' Everything must rest on divine authority. p. 118.

41 *Fragments*, p. 11.

42 *Point of View*, p. 40. Jacob Golomb correctly observes that 'To argue for authentic faith in a direct way is self-defeating in that it presupposes the authority of rationality.' 'Kierkegaard's Ironic Ladder to Authentic Faith' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 32 (1991) 65-81, p. 66.

43 *Fragments*, p. 11.

Elsewhere Kierkegaard himself contends that 'on its own the universally human position writes uncertainly and unsteadily; the Christian position writes with *guided* pen, witnesses to the accuracy... but does not produce.'[44] This situation of dependence which is an anathema to the Enlightenment epistemological project, explains, according to Kierkegaard, the profound significance of the concept of 'witness' in Christianity. It is the concept through which is safeguarded the recognition that Christian communication is not the conveyance of information from one human being to another but the mutual relation of a human being and her neighbour before God.[45]

Bearing witness to the Truth

The category of witness becomes prominent in Kierkegaard's work when his attack on the Danish Church received the impetus of Professor Martenson's eulogic pronouncement that Bishop Mynster had been a 'witness to the truth'. As is well known Kierkegaard was outraged by the remark, principally because, in his view, Mynster's manner of existence betrayed the Truth which he had been ordained to proclaim. 'To represent a man who by preaching Christianity has attained and enjoyed in the greatest measure all possible worldly goods and enjoyments, to represent him as a witness to the truth is as ridiculous as to talk about a maiden who is surrounded by her numerous troop of children.'[46] Christianity, Kierkegaard insists, is an existence communication. If subjectivity is truth and the truth is to be found in Christianity then every attempt to present Christianity as a doctrine abstracted from one's own life renders the communication false.

The inseparable relation between the communication and the communicator is elucidated by Anti-Climacus who by means of the concept of 'reduplication' identifies the need for the communicator 'to exist in what one understands'.[47] For the church in Christendom Kierkegaard believed that this required the renouncing of its privilege and ostentation. For those who preached it required an admission of their own failures and a transparent

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[44] *Journals,* 4/4958, II A 452 (1839). In a marginal note to this entry Kierkegaard adds, 'For what man does on his own never becomes more than a fig leaf.' The comment is representative of Kierkegaard's entire epistemological concern; where humanity seeks to attain the Truth by means divorced from God we succeed only in deluding ourselves about our own nakedness and indeed about our own sin.

[45] In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard alleges that the relational nature of Christian communication notwithstanding, the aim is always to encourage another 'to stand alone—with God's help'. See particularly pp. 255ff. The emphasis upon individual responsibility is undoubtedly correct but we have noted, in agreement with Karl Barth, that Kierkegaard's 'corrective', as he called it, runs the risk of obscuring the relation to one's neighbour altogether. See chapter six, note 8.

[46] *Attack Upon Christendom,* p. 10f.

[47] *Practice in Christianity,* p. 134. On Kierkegaard's understanding of reduplication, see chapter two, n.88.

reliance on grace. And for those ordinary citizens who thought themselves Christian by being born in Christendom it required that they step apart from the crowd and embark upon a new existence before God.[48] The pervasive failure of Christendom in each of these areas has rendered Christianity incredible. Expressed in the dismissive jibe of Nietzsche that if Christ is the redeemer then Christians ought to look more redeemed and seized upon by John Hick to prove that Christianity can lay no claim to a superior understanding of God, the incongruity between the Church's life and its testimony has contributed immensely to a widespread rejection of the gospel it purports to proclaim. In this instance Kierkegaard and Hick are agreed upon the symptoms of the Church's disease but their diagnoses are very different indeed. For Hick, it is the 'what' which is at fault. The doctrine of the incarnation, he contends, with its claim to a unique revelation of God is belied by the Church's witness. For Kierkegaard, however, it is the 'how' which requires revision. The church must learn to reduplicate in its life that which it proclaims with its lips. This does not mean that nothing short of perfection will do. Kierkegaard knows only too well that we stumble upon the path which Christ as prototype treads. But just at the moment of our stumbling Christ is present as redeemer. To be a church which reduplicates and thus also communicates what it knows is to be a community which forgives as it has been forgiven and which also stoops to bear another's sin.[49] Only when the manner of the Christian's existence, individually and in community, is fundamentally different from those who do not apprehend the servant form of God, will men and women be ready to consider that the Christian's faith is not absurd.

Kierkegaard was undoubtedly right in his recognition that when *we* bear witness the situation and authority of the subject are inevitably a part of the communication.[50] 'To discern a "witness for the truth" his personal mode of existence must be ethically examined in relation to what he says, to see if the personal existence is an expression of what he says...'[51] The concern for the personal existence of the 'communicator'

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[48] At the time of writing *Practice in Christianity* (1850) Kierkegaard still hoped that his work might be the occasion for the Establishment to 'acknowledge its distance from the requirement' of Christianity and thus to recognise its need of grace. In one of his contributions to *The Fatherland* in 1855, however, he admits that he then thinks the Establishment to be 'Christianly indefensible.' See *Attack Upon Christendom* p. 54-55.

[49] As, for example, the apostle who for the sake of proclaiming revelation is ready to be a sacrifice — to become repulsive to his or her own age. See *On Authority and Revelation*, especially chapter one.

[50] In *The Point of View of my Work as an Author* Kierkegaard laments that in his own age it is considered a matter of wisdom that 'one need not inquire about the communicator, but only about the communication...' p. 44f.

[51] *Point of View*, p. 132. Profound elucidation of this theme is offered by Donald MacKinnon in his essay, 'Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme' *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM Press 1979) 129-137.

becomes, as we have seen in the work of William Hamilton, the sole focus of attention in post-modern semantic theory. In contrast to the post-modern myopia, however, Kierkegaard himself refuses to make the situation and authority of the subject the whole of what is communicated. We also *bear witness* and this implies a reality and a truth which is not of our own making. There is a 'what', or more particularly a 'who', which is true irrespective of any human attempt to communicate or appropriate it. 'Christianity', Kierkegaard insists, 'maintains its objective subsistence apart from all believers'.[52] This 'objective subsistence' is the Truth which is in Christ Jesus. It is primarily for this reason that,

> ...the communication of the essentially Christian must end finally in 'witnessing'. The maieutic cannot be the final form because, Christianly understood, the truth doth not lie in the subject (as Socrates understood it), but in a revelation which must be proclaimed.
>
> It is very proper that the maieutic be used in Christendom, simply because the majority actually live in the fancy that they are Christians. But since Christianity still is Christianity, the one who uses the maieutic must become a witness.[53]

Where Thomas Kuhn sometimes appears uncertain about the relation between the knower and the known,[54] Kierkegaard is unequivocal; *metanoia*, the transformation and renewal of our minds, is a renewal which takes place under the impact of revelation. Thus revelation itself, and not our provisional and partial attempts to interpret it, is the final locus of Truth. Proper Christian witness, therefore, finds definition in Karl Barth's contention that 'if we know what revelation is, even in deliberately speaking about it we shall be content to let revelation speak for itself.'[55]

Discontent with revelation, on the other hand, characterises not only Kierkegaard's time but also our own. Purporting to be Christian, increasing numbers of theologians understand themselves as 'firsthand inventors or improvers'. An apparent conformity to this project is the initial appeal of Climacus' 'thought experiment' and it remains appealing for those who come to the end of the 'experiment' without seeing the irony. The decisive Christian vocation, however, marking the difference between mythology and theology, is to bear witness to that which is already given.[56] Bearing witness, of

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52 *On Authority and Revelation,* p. 168.
53 *Journals,* 2/1957, IX A 221 (1848).
54 Thus giving rise in some quarters to the accusation that he is guilty of 'subjective idealism'. See for example Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978) p. 240.
55 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* I/i, p. 347.
56 See *Journals,* 4/4958, II A 452 (1839).

course, assumes an authority which is not our own. It expects an eloquence born, not of reason or of imagination or of memory, but of God himself. It waits, in other words, upon the testimony of the Spirit through whom the Truth is made known. Thus, 'while the witness' "communication" addresses itself to the contemporaries, the "witness" himself addresses God and makes him the authority.'[57] There can be no satisfaction given to those who demand that the Truth be justified according to an authority which humanity supplies.[58] There is simply the testimony, 'we have believed...' and the invitation 'wilt thou also believe?' Such testimony, it is hoped, will, by God's grace, become the *occasion* for faith.

Direct communication

The move from the maieutic to the strategy of witness also marks a transition from indirect towards direct communication. 'Witnessing is still the form of communication which strikes the truest mean between direct and indirect communication. Witnessing is direct communication, but nevertheless it does not make one's contemporaries the authority.'[59] Kierkegaard wrote these words in 1849 by which time he had largely abandoned the strategy of pseudonymous authorship and had begun to communicate almost entirely under his own name. This change also marks the transition from the aesthetic to the religious authorship[60] but it is a change which had been anticipated in the early discourses which were also published with Kierkegaard's signature. What is the difference between these contrasting styles of authorship? We have learned already that the aesthetic style of the pseudonyms is a form of indirect communication addressed to the illusions of the age. The religious works, on the other hand, beginning with *Two Edifying Discourses* of 1843, are direct and are addressed, accordingly, not to the crowd of Christendom but to 'that individual whom with joy and gratitude I call my reader'.[61] Of such an individual Kierkegaard writes, 'Who thou art I know not, where thou art I know not, what thy name is I know not. Yet thou art my hope, my joy, my pride; unwittingly thou art an honour to me.'[62] Although we know not who the individual is

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57 *Journals*, 1/670, X^1 A 345 (1849).
58 Kierkegaard contends that Christian witness must refuse to give doubt the upper hand by subjecting itself to worldly authority. 'How unreasonable, and how impossible!', he says. 'If a liar were to say, "Be so kind as to fight with my own weapons", could truth be served by that proposal, or by winning such a victory?' See *Christian Discourses*, p. 199.
59 *Journals*, 1/670, X^1 A 345 (1849).
60 Kierkegaard repeatedly tells us in *The Point of View* that the *Postscript* marks the turning point in his authorship. pp. 13, 41, 53, 97.
61 The importance of this dedication and its preservation for use in the direct religious works is explained by Kierkegaard in *On My Work as an Author.* (*Point of View*, p. 152).
62 *That Individual* (*Point of View*, p. 111).

we do know that the individual is one who exists before God. "The individual' is a category of the spirit, of spiritual awakening.'[63] It is to such a one as this, one who shares the paradigm of Christian understanding, that Kierkegaard may speak directly. Thus the religious works are concerned, not with becoming, but with being a Christian. They are addressed to 'that individual' who has already begun such a task.

Existing in Truth

Philosophical Fragments began with the question of whether the Truth can be learned. On the face of it the question is simply an epistemological one. It is concerned with how one may know the Truth. In the work of Søren Kierkegaard, however, it is suggested that the significance of the question is not only epistemological but also existential and soteriological. For the problem of human life, in Kierkegaard's view, is not simply that we do not *know* the Truth but that we *exist* in untruth.[64] What is required, by way of salvation, is a transformation of the individual human being which is both epistemological and ontological, thus enabling her to 'exist in the Truth'. This study has been concerned with 'how' such a transformation takes place but there is a 'how' says Kierkegaard which when scrupulously rendered gives also the 'what'. Thus it is appropriate to ask finally, what constitutes an authentic existence in Truth?

Just as the speculative epistemological method is revealed to be inadequate for learning the Truth so also the speculative goal in which the individual seeks to view the world *sub specie aeterni* is a travesty of what it means to exist in Truth. Christianly understood, existence in Truth is an existence, not in the place of God as was and is the speculative dream, but before God. It is to exist in relationship to the one who in the form of a servant has delivered us from the bondage which we ourselves had chosen and has bestowed the gift of faith. To exist in Truth, therefore, is not to know all things but to know one thing, Christ and him crucified, and to live in the new freedom which Christ himself supplies.

The contrast between the Christian and the speculative understanding of what it means to exist in Truth is nowhere more profoundly expressed than in the sermon which is appended to *Either/Or* with its theme, 'the upbuilding that lies in the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong'.[65] Whereas the speculative thinker seeks to

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63 Ibid. p. 134.
64 We may remind the reader who is tempted to ask how Kierkegaard knows that we exist in untruth that the nature of our situation is itself revealed by God whose Word is apprehended in faith.
65 *Either/Or*, 341-354. See in particular, p. 352.

'fill up with wisdom' the distance between God and the individual, placing her hope thereby in human sophistical merit, the Christian recognises that the gulf has been filled up with grace. Thus is she set free from the bondage of self-justification and reoriented to the new task of discipleship. In the sermon with which we have been concerned the preacher counsels, 'In relation to God we are always in the wrong — this thought puts an end to doubt and calms the cares; it animates and inspires to action.' Although not a comprehensive definition, the preacher's words bear strong resemblance to the New Testament concept of *metanoia* which has informed our discussion of Kierkegaard's works.

Particular note must be taken of the preacher's contention that a proper appreciation of our situation before God 'animates and inspires to action'. There is no doubt, for Kierkegaard, that salvation depends entirely upon grace but there is also no doubt that with grace comes responsibility. Christianity, as has often been repeated, is an existence communication which if reduced to a doctrine is evacuated of its power. Sylvia Walsh Utterback accurately interprets Kierkegaard when she writes,

> Being a Christian requires the application of one's knowledge of Christianity to one's existence, *becoming* the truth rather than just *knowing* the truth. Thus Christianity is actually represented and known only by existing in it.[66]

An authentic existence in Truth is not characterised therefore, by faultless doctrinal orthodoxy, which is however to be sought since heresy seriously confuses and tragically misleads, but rather by obedience. 'Essentially', Kierkegaard notes in his *Journals*, 'Christianity cannot be proclaimed by talking — but by acting.'[67] The one who is our Saviour and Deliverer is also the prototype who invites us to follow him. We must say, therefore, that if in this study we have attained any conceptual clarity about what Christianity is, we have yet achieved very little. As with Johannes Climacus, the task of obedience and reduplication lies always before us. In respect of whatever conceptual clarity there may be, however, we may say with Kierkegaard, 'Not that I have grasped it — but that I am grasped.'[68] It is in the same manner that we also receive faith and grace sufficient for the task.

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66 Sylvia Walsh Utterback, 'Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence' (Emory University Ph.D Dissertation 1975) p. 8.
67 *Journals*, 3/3506, X^3 A 246 (1850).
68 *Journals*, 4/3956, X^3 A 777 (1851).

APPENDIX ONE

THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST

In recommending the abandonment of the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, John Hick offers six distinct arguments. In chapter seven of this study the insights of Johannes Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments* were brought to bear on four of these arguments with the result that Hick's proposal for 'a second Christianity' was found to conform to what Climacus has called 'a return to the Socratic'. In this and the appendix which follows, Hick's two remaining arguments will be considered and some suggestions made as to the direction Kierkegaard might have taken in response to them. In respect of both arguments a fuller response than can be offered here is undoubtedly warranted.

One of the most prominent themes of John Hick's scholarly career, motivated by the conviction that God's salvific purpose is to be extended to the whole of humankind, has been a concern to promote inter-religious dialogue. Pursuant to this concern, Hick argues that

> a non-traditional Christianity based upon this [non-incarnational] understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God, and can better serve the development of world community and world peace than a Christianity which continues to see itself as the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible for human beings.[1]

Two initial responses might be made to Hick's argument as it is formulated here before we proceed to consider the matter in general terms. In the first place Hick is clearly troubled by the claim to uniqueness entailed by the confession that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God and imagines that it hinders progress toward the development of world community. The uniqueness of Christ is clearly entailed by Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity so we shall have to consider whether he is guilty of the sins which Hick describes. Secondly, however, we must reject the caricature of Christianity which Hick advances in the citation above. Christianity does not 'see itself as the locus of

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1 *The Metaphor*, p. ix.

final revelation', nor as 'the purveyor of the only salvation possible for human beings'. Christianity, at least insofar as it is truly presented by Kierkegaard, insists that no human institution, not even Christianity itself can be identified as the locus of revelation. A Christianity which properly understands itself, *bears witness* to the revelation which is found in Jesus Christ. It does not presume to replace him. It follows from this that Christianity is not the purveyor of salvation. Christian evangelism, D. T. Niles is reputed to have said, is one poor beggar telling another where to find bread. In authentic Christian evangelism there is not the least presumption to be the supplier of bread oneself. This is not to say, of course, that Christian people have not, far too often, conformed to the caricature which Hick offers but where they have done so they have misconstrued the news that is disclosed in Christ. While the rejection of Hick's representation of Christianity does not enable us to discount his challenge to traditional doctrine it does expose as rather perverse his suggestion that belief in the incarnation engenders 'a religious superiority complex which readily manifests itself in arrogance, contempt, condemnation and hostility.'[2] There remains, nevertheless, a serious question about whether the doctrine of the incarnation coheres with the good news of salvation which Jesus himself proclaimed. This, incidentally, is the Christian way to frame the question. If we ask with Hick, whether the doctrine coheres with contemporary ideals of tolerance and goodwill towards other religions then we simply beg the question as to what authority such ideals have. Of course the same question must be asked concerning the authority of Jesus but because Hick is our interlocutor on this occasion we may proceed on the basis that he too admits that Jesus is in some manner revelatory of God.[3] Surely in the context of such an admission no further legitimation of his authority is required. Nor indeed could it be supplied!

The fundamental problem as Hick sees it, is that God wills that all people should be saved but this divine purpose cannot be fulfilled under the condition that salvation depends upon one's relation to a particular historical figure about whom much of the world's population, through no fault of their own, remains ignorant. Although Johannes Climacus has little to say about it, he too acknowledges the problem:

> The happiness linked to a historical condition excludes all who are outside the condition, and among those are the countless ones who are excluded through no fault of their own but by the accidental

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[2] Ibid. p. 86.

[3] See, for example, Hick's admission that Jesus lived a life of openness and response to God and that to some extent at least he did God's will and 'incarnated' a love that reflects the divine love. *The Metaphor*, p. 105.

> circumstance that Christianity has not yet been proclaimed to them.[4]

Climacus, we recall, stands on the brink of faith. He has recognised that his relation to God depends not at all upon his own merit or the strength of his resources, but totally upon the gift of God. But he has not yet received that gift and has not yet begun to 'think out of' the reality of God's presence among us in Christ. To him the whole situation still seems paradoxical and the apparent limitations upon the scope of God's salvific purpose only compound the problem. It would seem advisable therefore to take leave of Climacus at this point and to inquire whether Kierkegaard himself, who has already made the transition to faith, can shed any light on the matter.[5]

Along with their differences in perspective we have noted that Climacus and Kierkegaard have different understandings of the same truth and articulate that truth, on occasion, with distinctively different vocabularies. Thus, for example, Kierkegaard believes that salvation, though entailing the most strenuous striving to imitate Christ, is in the first and decisive place a matter of grace. Climacus, on the other hand, never uses the term although we might well say that grace is just the concept he needs to articulate much of what he understands. In our quest to provide the basis for a response to the problem currently before us, however, it is to Kierkegaard's discussions of grace that we must turn. Thus,

> We ordinary human beings do not have a direct or spontaneous God-relationship; therefore are not able unconditionally to express the unconditional, and we always need grace beforehand, because even the most sincere beginning is always imperfect compared to the demand of the ideal — consequently it is like a new sin. Thus grace in first place.[6]

Here Kierkegaard frankly admits, in full conformity with the deliberations of Climacus but with added insight, that the restoration of communion between God and humanity is utterly contingent, not upon what we do, but upon what God has done for us. Between this and Hick's concern to give eternal credit to the merits of every religion there is an infinite difference which, when analysed, leaves Hick and not Kierkegaard with difficulties about the scope of God's purpose of salvation. Hick builds his case for the salvific efficacy of other religions upon the manifestations of saintliness and virtue across

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4 *Postscript*, p. 582f.
5 For two attempts to deal with the problem in Climacus' own terms see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 270., and Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, p. 136.
6 *Journals*, 2/1493, X^5 A 101 (1853-54).

the whole range of human religious traditions.[7] Leaving aside for the moment questions about the criteria to be used in such assessments it is evident that Hick's understanding of salvation makes everything dependent upon humanity again. If we are to return, as Hick seems to require, to salvation by works then we have much less ground for hope than if salvation depends crucially upon the faithfulness and grace of God. The point is illustrated by Kierkegaard in the following *Journal* entry:

> The objective reality of Christ's Atonement, independent of the subjectivity appropriating this to itself, is very clearly indicated in the story about the ten lepers. All of them were in fact healed, but 'Your faith has made you well' is said only of the tenth one, who gratefully turned back to offer God the glory.
>
> (In margin) What was it then that made the others well?[8]

Without denigrating faith — it is synonymous with glory being offered to God — Kierkegaard here indicates that salvation depends on what God in Christ has done for us and not upon what we are able to do for God. That news is true for the whole of humanity. Thus the confession that Jesus Christ is unique and that salvation comes through him need carry none of the exclusivist, imperialistic or triumphalistic overtones which Hick thinks to be inevitable. Such confession more properly takes the form of the disciple of Jesus, knowing that in Christ her sins are forgiven, knowing that in Christ God has reached her and embraced her with divine love, knowing that in Christ her own worthiness is not the issue, knowing all these things the confession of Christ's uniqueness is the humble yet confident expectation that as God as acted for her so also has he acted for every member of the human family, irrespective of their piety, of their upbringing, their spiritual sensitivity or ethical accomplishment. God has acted for them as also for her. Thus in the end the disciple of Jesus expresses similar confidence in the broad extent of God's saving purpose as is proposed by John Hick but with the crucial difference that the condition upon which God's saving purpose is accomplished, far from being the shreds of worthiness to be found in all human religions, is the costly self-giving love of God laid bare at Calvary.

Not least among the features which distinguish the Christian position from that recommended by Hick is the difference which Kierkegaard has insisted upon all along, namely the magnitude of human sin. Thus, 'the fact that Jesus died for my sins certainly

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[7] See *The Metaphor*, chapter thirteen and more particularly Hick's article, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press 1987) 16-36.

[8] *Journals*, 4/4534, II A 263 (1838).

expresses the magnitude of grace, but that he will involve himself with me only on this condition also expresses the magnitude of my sins, the infinite distance between myself and God.'[9] Certainly Kierkegaard thinks that because Christianity understands this it more nearly approaches the truth than other religions[10] but precisely because Christianity understands this it has no basis for any sense of superiority. The truth Christianity knows is a truth which humbles and yet which also gives hope for the whole of humankind.

There are elements of Kierkegaard's thought, as there are with the thought of anyone who has understood something of God's grace, which tend towards universalism.[11] It might well be asked then, why one should become a Christian if God's salvific purpose extends to the whole of humankind. The story of the ten lepers is again instructive here. Having learnt that salvation is a gift given through Jesus Christ is it not self-evidently proper that we should return to thank him? This provides a motivation for Christian evangelism of which John Hick would undoubtedly disapprove but it is not lumbered with all the faults that Hick erroneously imputes to those who confess that God is uniquely present with us in Christ. *Christian* evangelism is not motivated by any sense that Christian religious behaviour is better than the religious behaviour of others but by the conviction that God's behaviour is sufficient for us all. The evangelist simply seeks to pass on the good news that God has not left the matter of salvation in our hands and along with that comes witness to the pattern of redeemed life which has been set before us in Christ. It is precisely the pattern of his life and especially his death which makes clear that God's purpose of salvation does not wait upon our establishing our worthiness before him.

One more thing might be said about Kierkegaard's inclinations toward universalism. Throughout his *Journals* there are passages which suggest on the one hand that grace recognises no distinctions between people, while on the other, there are passages which recognise that the way is narrow and hard. That both things are said together by Kierkegaard reflects the fact that both things are said together in the New Testament. Twice in his *Journals* Kierkegaard simply asks the question: 'A human being is saved by

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[9] *Journals*, 2/1471, X^2 A 189 (1849).

[10] Thus he writes, 'The consciousness of sin is and continues to be the *condition sine qua non* for all Christianity, and if one could somehow be released from this, he could not be a Christian. And this is the very proof of Christianity's being the highest religion, that none other has given such a profound and lofty expression of man's significance — that he is a sinner. It is this consciousness which paganism lacks." *Journals*, 1/452, V A 10 (1844).

[11] Vernard Eller gives a brief discussion of the nature of Kierkegaard's universalism in *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship*, p. 284f.

grace alone — are all of us therefore saved? Are these one and the same?'[12] It is theologically correct, along with Kierkegaard, to give no answer here. The question of salvation for the whole of humankind is an open question — open because it is a matter of grace and not necessity. Because of Jesus, however, there is good reason to hope.

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12 *Journals*, 2/1503, XI^2 A 342 (1854). Cf. 2/1495, X^5 A 108 (1853).

APPENDIX TWO

INCARNATION AND ETHICS

We come to the last of Hick's arguments against the traditional understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. Putting it quite simply Hick alleges that 'historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils.'[1] As a matter of historical fact Hick is undoubtedly correct although the 'fact' is often adduced without due attention being paid to abundant counter-evidence of the doctrine inspiring deeds of impressive compassion, selflessness and unquestionable good. It is not our purpose here, however, to trade examples in the hope that the balance will eventually fall on the side of traditional Christian faith. Whether or not Jesus Christ is properly understood as the incarnate Son of God cannot possibly be resolved in that way.

The critical question is rather whether the evils which Hick refers to, and he gives the examples of antisemitism, Western imperialist exploitation of the Third world and the subordination of woman, are *entailed* by the confession that God is present among us in Christ? We have to ask precisely what Hick means when he claims that such evils have been *validated* by appeal to the doctrine of the incarnation? For if it can be shown that there is a direct logical route from the doctrine of the incarnation to evils which Jesus himself would undoubtedly abhor then the case for a revision of the doctrine becomes very compelling indeed. There are undoubtedly those who wish to argue this strong case but it turns out that Hick is not one of them. He admits that 'the connection between the deification of Jesus [sic] and antisemitism is not... a straight line of logical necessity',[2] that 'belief in the divine status of Christ did not logically require [the] human aberration [of Western imperialism]'[3] and that appeal to the incarnation in support of the subordination of women 'does not establish the falsity of the dogma'[4] but the historical connections between the doctrine and these evils prompt us, Hick contends, to look at it again to see whether it really is an essential Christian belief. Given the shameful history of the Church in the areas specified there can be no argument but that Hick's plea should be taken very seriously. The way to do so, we suggest, is to consider carefully the

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1 *The Metaphor*, p. ix.
2 Ibid. p. 82.
3 Ibid. p. 84f.
4 Ibid. p. 86.

question already posed as to whether the doctrine of the incarnation leads directly toward the evils adduced.

That task is much more extensive and demanding than can be attempted here. We make only two points that seem to us important and which are derived from the work of Kierkegaard. The first is that the argument advanced by Hick trades upon the genuine insight that 'by their fruits you shall know them'. It was the recognition of this relationship that caused Kierkegaard such consternation over the role of the Church in Christendom and compelled him to mount his famous 'Attack'. He did not demand, however, as we have pointed out in chapter seven above, that Christians should be perfect, only that they be honest about the requirements of Christianity and realistic about the degree of their conformity to the ideal. Repentance in response to one's having fallen short of the ideal is perfectly in order but lowering the ideal to suit one's own interests and desires is certainly not. The second strategy, instead of signalling the falsity of Christianity, serves rather as its betrayal. The point being made here is simply that the relation between a doctrine and its 'fruit' permits of two kinds of interpretation. Bad fruit may signify that the doctrine must be cut out, but it may also signify, as Kierkegaard thought was the case in Christendom, that the fruit is falsely attributed to the doctrine in question. This admission is not to be found in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*.[5] It is therefore emphasised here in order that the required discussion be enabled to proceed without improper prejudice.

The second point we derive from Kierkegaard in relation to the present concern is the question of the criterion to which appeal may be made in our judgements of good and evil, and of what is faithful to the confession of Christ's divinity and what is not. The point here may be illustrated by taking the most notorious instance of antisemitism in recent history, that of the Nazi extermination of countless Jews in the concentration camps of the Third Reich. It is certainly appalling that Christians attempted to give theological justification to such atrocities but it must also be recognised that specific appeal was made to the reality of God's presence with us in Christ in condemning the actions of the Nazi regime.[6] The question to be faced in respect of our current concern is 'on which side did the theological truth lie?' Thus is raised the question of how we shall

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[5] The point is nearly admitted by Hick in the context of his discussion of the 1976 Vatican Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood where he acknowledges that Karl Rahner condemned the Declaration as heretical, thus implying that the fruit did not belong to the orthodox Christian tree. Hick, however, does nothing more than acknowledge Rahner's response and proceeds as if it required no qualifications to his argument. *The Metaphor*, p. 86.

[6] The Barmen Declaration is the most obvious case in point.

decide. It was the argument of Kierkegaard that Christ himself must be the criterion of what is true and false in our theological claims. But such an argument can only be justified by the very doctrine which Hick disputes. If he himself wishes to argue that by the standard of Jesus Christ the Nazis were wrong, then he owes us an explanation of why such an appeal should carry any theological weight. If, as is more usually his strategy, Hick appeals to universally shared ethical insights then he is in the precarious position of deciding the matter by majority vote.

It is not our purpose here to offer our own opinion on the matter we have been discussing. It has already been suggested that the challenge posed by Hick requires much more extensive consideration than can be given here. We have sought only to bring to the discussion some matters of Kierkegaardian concern which, in *The Metaphor of God Incarnate,* John Hick had improperly ignored. We close with the observation that in these last two concerns of Hick he retains — in the affirmation that the truth is to be found in the natural theological insights of humankind, and in the implicit appeal to universal ethical standards — the presuppositions of a Socratic quest for Truth. The question that is posed for us by Søren Kierkegaard is whether the retention of such presuppositions is compatible with the claim to be Christian.

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